

Teacher's Voice

Forming meaningful relationships: How equitable partnerships can maximise creativity for SEND students and their teachers

Forming meaningful relationships has led the way for schools and arts, culture and heritage organisations in Oxford to make lasting impact for pupils. In testimony to the power of partnerships, this article has been co-written by Miranda Millward (Arts Engagement Officer, Oxford University Gardens, Libraries and Museums) and Thomas Procter Legg (Headteacher, Iffley Academy).

Since June 2018, Iffley Academy has been working towards achieving Artsmark. Their Artsmark programme is a co-curated project with Oxford University Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM), and leading independent school, St Helen and St Katharine in Abingdon.

The Iffley Academy is an Ofsted-rated Outstanding special school located in central Oxford, around a mile from the main GLAM venues. The school supports children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) - those with cognition and learning difficulties, social and emotional mental health difficulties and communication and interaction needs.

"Through our Artsmark journey, we are seeking to develop young people's diverse social and Cultural Capital, their equitable access to cultural spaces, and to maximise their creative ability." (Thomas Procter Legg, Headteacher, Iffley Academy)

The project's main partner, Oxford University Gardens Libraries and Museums, comprises seven unique and inspiring venues: Ashmolean Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, History of Science Museum, Museum of Natural History, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford Botanic Garden, and the Arboretum (located outside the city).

St Helen and St Katharine School is one of the leading girls' schools in the country with a history of high aspiration and academic achievement. Through an inspiring range of extracurricular opportunities, students are encouraged to explore their interests and give new things a go. The school has a longstanding tradition of working with nearby schools and groups, continually developing its partnership programmes to find new ways for inspiration and learning to flow both ways and benefit the local community.

"At the heart of this partnership are genuine relationships between key professionals. Staff at Iffley Academy and the GLAM venues have been able to prioritise spending time together to build trust and cross sector relationships that allow for co-construction and developing confidence in new professional skills", explains GLAM's Miranda Millward. These strong relationships foster the best possible outcomes for students as well as a flexible and person-centred approach to learning. They also model new types of relationships for the students at Iffley Academy, she says. "Museum professionals have been able to become trusted adults, building valuable and necessary social capital for Iffley Academy students, who can be isolated due to their SEND, socio-economic issues (over 40% of students at Iffley Academy are in receipt of Pupil Premium funds) and for some, a lack of cultural ownership in their own city."

Creative INSET training for staff has been integral to the project. This has taken a number of forms,

including providing free tickets to charging exhibitions at the Ashmolean. CPD training provided at GLAM venues for Iffley staff has proven to be excellent in terms of building relationships and sparking ideas, with museum staff keen to discuss opportunities and resources such as handling collections, which were subsequently taken to school to support learning. "Significantly, this CPD has extended the project beyond the core Artsmark offer. Teachers have taken the relationship into other curriculum areas, with GLAM venues now involved in the delivery of science, maths and literacy", Thomas explains.

Staff feedback focuses not only on Teaching and Learning opportunities but also on raising staff wellbeing:

"The twilight [CPD] sessions have enabled the teaching staff to spend time being creative and bonding together which is not something we have time for on a daily basis. The feeling of teamwork can only be a good thing for wellbeing and morale across the teaching staff. It's refreshing to hear so much support and understanding of the needs of our pupils, which gives us as educators more confidence in building museum trips into our curriculum, therefore broadening the horizons for both learners and teachers." (Iffley Academy Teacher)

St Helen and St Katharine School is also working towards Artsmark, and has had a relationship with GLAM over many years. St Helen's and Iffley have been able to come together to share ideas and resources, facilitated by GLAM in an equitable way, enabling staff to develop their understanding of different sectors.

St Helen and St Katharine's generous financial support enabled printmaker Janet Lueck to work with Iffley students, culminating in an exhibition of printmaking in the School's purpose-built gallery space. St Helen's ceramics teacher Ben Drew also worked with students from Iffley who were studying for their Art and Design BTEC and Bronze Arts Award. Most significantly, Head of Art Jane McDonald led an inspiring INSET, providing hands-on art activities which could be taken straight into the classroom, such as simple book-making and multimedia collages frozen in simple laminates.

The relationship is reciprocal: in return, Thomas Procter Legg, Head Teacher at Iffley Academy, ran an INSET on reflective practice for St Helen and St Katharine staff, discussing reflective skills, mental health and restorative approaches.

"This has been a fantastic opportunity for students to access resources and individuals that are new to them", says Thomas. "Many of the benefits of the partnership with St Helen's are about expanding the

circle of trusted adults and introducing children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to wider social scenarios. This further develops expressive and receptive language, confidence and a sense of self."

GLAM staff have also developed their practice, Miranda says. They are more attuned to less visible SEND, such as autism or ADHD. Actions in line with this awareness have included: meeting groups in advance via Skype before visiting the school, allowing for a gentle introduction; opening venues early just for Iffley students, allowing for a relaxed viewing of exhibitions; and visiting the school for project work, bringing the museum to the students via handling collections. This has led to true collaborative work, calling on Iffley staff and their specialist skills to develop social stories and guides for the venues, which in turn helps prepare students for the sensory and social challenges of visiting a busy cultural space.

"Cultural change is at the heart of this - a new mindset is being developed through a creative process. In this partnership, we are all learners and we are all taking risks. There is no project owner - co-curation and sharing is key." (Thomas Procter Legg and Miranda Millward)

