

HOW DO SPECIAL NEEDS ALTER ARTS EDUCATION PROGRAMS OUTSIDE THE REGULAR CLASSROOM SETTING: AN EXAMPLE FROM THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM IN BOSTON

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The work we do at the Children's Museum in Boston may not strictly fit into the commonly held notions of arts education. However, the field trip we offer to children with special needs provides a good example for discussion of some of the larger issues confronting cultural institutions attempting to serve a special needs population. Therefore, I would like to tell you about our experiences in altering our programming and environment for special needs field trips and discuss the problems, benefits and costs.

About five years ago, Elaine Gurian, Director of the Visitor Center, began a field trip program specifically for children with special needs. As the mother of a severely retarded child, she had observed that in order for her son to make the most of his museum experience, he needed to visit in a non-competitive atmosphere, with few distractions, and a companion to encourage and help him explore the environment and the activities it offered.

In order to create that kind of experience for groups of children with special needs, the Museum was closed one morning per week, and reservations were taken for two groups of twenty children each. The three-month college intern staff were utilized as one-to-one guides for the visit, and an orientation and continuous training program were designed to support them.

Who The Program Serves:

Visitors in special needs groups are primarily children from segregated, self-contained, or resource room settings. This includes groups of children who have been diagnosed as mentally retarded, orthopedically handicapped, visually or auditorily impaired, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed and multiply handicapped. Some percentage of our visitors are adolescents and adults mainly from settings for the mentally retarded. Previously, this meant mostly state schools or private institutions, but currently we see groups from workshop situations, half-way houses, and nursing homes.

Since there are no restrictions in the reservation process other than size of group and time, visitor's disabilities range from the minimal to the most severe impairments. Altogether, the program serves about 1500 visitors with special needs per year.

What We Are Providing:

We basically provide a field trip program that is special in the following ways:

- . there are no other groups in the Museum
- . we provide one-to-one staffing from our intern volunteer group
- . we provide an opportunity for teachers and leaders to be observers and/or 'non-responsible' interactors, and to gather ideas at our Resource Center
- . we provide the opportunity for visitors with any level of disability to enjoy a participatory museum experience in a non-threatening atmosphere that is uniquely flexible to their needs

for students from institutional settings, we provide an important opportunity for social interaction with our staff

we provide field placement opportunities to students studying special education and volunteer opportunities for other interested high school and college students.

The Environment:

The program takes place in what is already an ideal setting for children with special needs. Museum exhibits are participatory in nature and encourage the visitor to explore the environment both physically and mentally. There are opportunities for the manipulation of objects, for role-play, for mentally challenging activities, for handling of live animals and animal artifacts, for gross motor activity, for quiet play, for arts and crafts activities. These opportunities exist for a broad range of physical and mental skill levels, and staff are trained to allow children to explore the materials on whatever level seems appropriate to their skills.

The environment presents two major problems for this program. First the building is not barrier-free. We currently solve this problem by carrying children and wheelchairs up and down the short staircases that connect level to level. Our new facility, to be opened in two years will of course be ramped. Second, the atmosphere is over-stimulating for some of the children we see. The number of choices available can be overwhelming to children who are having trouble focusing their energy or attention. We work with staff to provide them with ways to help such children make the most of their visit.

Structure of the Program:

- 1 The group leader makes a reservation for up to twenty-five visitors by telephone
- 2 The group leader receives a confirmation letter, information about the visit, two guest passes, and is asked to complete a form asking for a little information about each child. (see attached) This information is important for us to do proper planning for the visit.
- 3 Upon arrival at the Museum, the intern floor manager for that week greets the group, introduces and pairs visitors with staff, and the visit begins.
- 4 Groups stay for one hour. The floor manager asks leaders to give information about their program and invites them to fill out a questionnaire (see attached). The program supervisor is always on hand for intern support, and to observe interactions which will be discussed later in the support meeting.
- 5 A one hour support meeting follows the two visits. The emphasis for interns and volunteers is on development of skills, accumulation of information, and confidence building. Topics for discussion include specific problems or successes that took place during the visits, general information about a disability or educational method, feedback to interns from questionnaires and program supervisor observation. Probably the most important element of the meeting is the chance to talk about any anxiety that may have been experienced by staff, and the chance to be reinforced for growth of confidence and ease by the supervisor and the rest of the group.
- 6 An optional sign language class follows, during the lunch hour.

How We Altered Our Routine for This Program:

In altering our school group program we accommodate about one hundred less school group visitors per week. For a Museum of our small size and large popularity, this is a significant loss.

However, the biggest difficulty in beginning and maintaining the program is, of course, time. Different reservation rules and confirmations take time, as does recruiting additional volunteer staff. But most especially, the super-

vision and training of a new intern staff every three months takes more than a half a day weekly of scarce administrative time. Altogether, the program costs us upwards of \$10,000 per year. We have been unable thus far to find a funding source for this work.

Benefits to the Museum:

Having made the commitment to this program five years ago, we have found it to be well worth the time and money expenditure, and the loss in school group numbers. The program has become an integral part of the internship. It introduces interns to another part of the educational spectrum and gives them the opportunity to work one-to-one instead of with groups of children. More importantly, this process allows interns and volunteers to confront their own anxiety and increase their understanding. More than fifty people per year participate in the program, many of them heading for careers in education. This experience allows them to realize that some children have special needs instead of feeling that terrifying handicaps have children somehow attached to them.

Teachers often discover new things about their students as a result of the program. They may see activities they haven't tried before that can be copied in their own setting. They are often surprised by especially good behavior or longer attention spans exhibited by their students in the Museum environment. Some teachers have taken advantage of the program as an introduction for their group. Once they have had the chance to explore in this more flexible atmosphere, they can return later during public time with greater confidence.

By offering field placements and volunteer positions to college and high school students, we have become an important resource to the educational community. The program has also called attention to special education issues for our own permanent staff. All of this has been of great benefit to the Museum.

Is This Model Applicable to Other Institutions?

I think there are three major reasons for the success of this program. First is the continuing commitment of the Museum to maintain and improve the program over the years. Second is the nature of the Museum setting which adapts itself so gracefully to the needs and interests of its visitors. But most important is the availability of well prepared and well supervised interns. One-to-one staffing means that the children don't get lumped together for this experience even though they may come from a setting in which they are segregated by disability. It means that interns can gauge activities, explanations and physical tasks for the individual child.

Though I have made much of the training process, let me emphasize that it's nothing fancy. Though the administrators who have supervised this program have both had experience in special education neither are special educators. Some of the interns have had previous experience, some have not. Some are terrified, others are not. Regardless of their backgrounds, they all grow, and most do superbly.

So, once an institution is committed to the idea of beginning such a program, the institution must look carefully at the resources available. Those without many inherent tactile opportunities probably need to design some. Although we do not reserve by disability it might make sense to do so, by making a touch tour of artifacts or sculpture available for children with visual impairments, a signed or one-to-one tour available for children with language deficits that is sprinkled with participatory activities related to, but not directly involving, artifacts. This kind of program would of course represent an even greater time commitment, especially at the outset, and might also involve a more complicated training process.

Almost all cultural institutions depend to some extent on volunteers. It has been our experience that the recruiting of good volunteers depends a great deal on the kind of structure and supervision we can offer, and a program with this kind of consistency and focus should be one that volunteers find quite attractive. Again commitment on the part of the institution is an important element.

There is one other issue that should be raised, this program is not clearly mainstreamed. Although Chapter 766 has been law in Massachusetts for three years, and we are seeing some increased mainstreaming in our regular school groups, there has been no drop at all in reservations for the special education field trip. It is my feeling that there never will be, since the benefits for more severely disabled children are so great.

When mainstreaming has hopefully become more widespread, one assumes that for us, the special needs field trip will continue to be a training ground for interns enabling them to deal more successfully with mainstreamed groups.

↓ Teacher training

Kid training -

general HP.

sped kids - their emotional issues / peers & teachers

↓ other teachers accept kids

↓ talk to each other -

Re: Sped kids

Teachers feel inadequate as teachers

Teachers pass feelings on to their kids - whatever they are

Kids with different disabilities have different difficulties

Teachers need to confront own feelings before they can help kids!

• I'm going to hurt him

• I don't like him

• I'm not adequate

✓ everyone's exp.

— Pre-schoolers - ^{Amherst}discretion
series program

Re: other kids

Kids at different ages will have different ideas

Kids always know and will always have questions

emotional
retardation
visual
hearing

LD
mobility

↓
they can be
stars - something
they know about

enlist special child but don't focus
be open

Resources:

Zoom - EB

Rebels ? WGBH

feeling free - Schol.

what if - TCM

meeting st. - RJ

Kids on the Block -
Jr. L.

US & them

Kit

Different approach

504 -

Vocation Week

What If Book

Exhibit next Oct.