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Lighting pathways: Investing in visually impaired creativity

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High unemployment amongst visually impaired (VI) young people is a global concern, as is the connected impact on health and wellbeing attached to the lack of opportunity, meaningful engagement and friendship group generation. How can a creative curriculum be shaped so as to address these connected needs, i.e. providing opportunity, routes to employment and friendship-making? Although VI has the lowest participatory ratings of all disabilities, people with visual impairment are simultaneously viewed as a significant and 'untapped' workforce (Hewett and Keil, 2015). I present here for reflection a curriculum designed to challenge these connected needs and invite participation from school communities of learning, as a believer in 'learning by doing' (Kolb, 1984; Lewin, 1948).

Although the OECD and the World Bank have, for some years, sought a 'formula' to reconcile social cohesion with economic success (OECD, 1998, 2001a, 2001b), little 'voice' has been given to VI young people within this context. Arguably, a key to providing access to the world of work for those with VI is based within engaging the strengths of our young people in communities as part of community, whilst investing in their own innovations. This frames the action-research-informed curriculum 'formula' (Patterson, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2019a, 2019b; Patterson and Loomis, 2007, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Patterson and Patterson, 2010) developed and delivered at St Vincent's School for Sensory Impairment in West Derby, Liverpool, as I now share: **human/social capital + 'reverse inclusion' + service-learning + creativity = outcomes**

Encouraging confidence to be creative

Adding some detail to the formula, all pupils come off the National Curriculum on Wednesdays to follow what we term 'enrichment'. Here, pupils make choices to attend lessons in which they have, or perceive themselves as having, strength within (i.e. their human capital). Enrichment sessions are wide and varied but cover the overarching strands of music, art, dance, drama, sports, ICT and environmental work (i.e. those that may fall under creativity). Individual pupil strengths are nurtured and enhanced in these enrichment

sessions as, simultaneously, sighted peers from surrounding schools are invited into school to participate. Here, St Vincent's pupils act in leadership roles as 'trainers of the trainers' in the enrichment sessions, using their given strengths. This falls within the concept of 'reverse inclusion'. Rather than being 'sight-guided' or using a white cane in unfamiliar surroundings so as to be physically included, bringing peers into the environment that VI pupils are used to navigating allows for a focus to be placed (by staff and pupils) on the use of their strength in a leadership role. Energies are used within the enrichment session focus, rather than expended on the concentration needed for mobility, i.e. not walking into obstacles and falling. In essence, a level playing field is presented and the tables turned with a VI leading opportunity. A significant increase in confidence and belief in themselves amongst our VI young people in this way remains a significant outcome. It is an outcome in a stepwise manner, which can be engaged powerfully, as will be explained further on through the Sightbox as an outcome of the enrichment curriculum. Sightbox is a 'toolkit' for access to sports and education for VI young people. In collaboration with Rotary and Lions clubs, it is sent out of Liverpool to VI communities of learning around the world. It contains a range of VI sport equipment, such as a ball with a bell and boccia (bowls), with a surrounding curriculum. However, new content is

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conceptualised and generated at St Vincent's, with collaborative partners for future inclusion in the box. Sightbox is an ongoing and evolving curriculum outcome, embracing entrepreneurial learning and design technology.

Exploring outcomes from creativity

A simple example of creative enrichment and reverse inclusion is the ceramic work that pupils have undertaken. Highlighting sight loss in the Great War for the 100th-year commemorations, pupils designed and made a poppy-themed range of items and taught sighted peers the process, during enrichment. The first poppy brooch made was sent to her Majesty the Queen, who responded with a letter of thanks, whilst the Duke of Edinburgh received a DofE Award poppy bowl and large ceramic reliefs were presented to the City of Liverpool and at the Palace of Westminster. The then prime minister Theresa May was seen on television wearing one of our poppies during Question Time, and a ceramic cross won the national 'Never Such Innocence' Great War commemoration competition, featuring in a book. Pupils taught with increased confidence their creative ideas to others, seeing their skills and strengths acknowledged and celebrated at the highest of levels.

› The new confidence instilled in this way is fed into design work (science, technology, engineering and maths: STEAM), where pupils are encouraged to conceptualise VI, enabling equipment of relevance to their specific VI. This has been supported by (service-learning) volunteer student teachers and engineers from Liverpool Hope University and Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), who have worked up pupil-led ideas to full production, thus introducing entrepreneurial learning opportunities. The design ideas are then included in the physical @sightboxuk, which, with its surrounding sports, innovation and enterprise curriculum, has now been sent to VI schools in over 20 countries, including Pakistan, India, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Peru, Virgin Islands, Nepal, Indonesia, Kenya, Gambia and Malawi, reinforcing the ‘social capital’ element of the stated formula.

New ideas for Sightbox content have already come back for consideration from Indonesia

and Kenya, thus generating new trade opportunities. A connected project funded by Lions clubs is simultaneously providing prescription sunglasses for children with albinism via the ‘ET Box’. St Vincent’s pupils, already in the process of being physical ‘trainers of the trainers’, are now also in the first stages of being ‘remote’ trainers, thus opening a further strand of ‘tech’ innovations, limited only by the imaginations of VI young people themselves. Outcomes may be measured in increased confidence, opportunities, friendship generation and creative innovation, rewarded by the wonderful Duke of Edinburgh Award as an alternative qualification. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of VI abilities and strengths across employers has been generated, where our next steps in the school vision lead us towards ‘supported internships’. The outcomes from our curriculum may be noted as:

- providing enhanced life chances and employability, in synergy

with new trade and innovation opportunities for VI children and young people

- connecting VI young people locally, nationally and internationally as the ‘change makers’ themselves, both physically and remotely, as trainers and innovators
- connecting the international Sightbox, working in synergy with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (17, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10) for VI inclusion.

Developing individual opportunities

The spin-offs from this creative curriculum formula are myriad, as they connect with individual pupil strengths. A wonderful example within the enrichment, leading to Sightbox inclusion, is ‘I Rugby’. Supported by LJMU (service-learning students), Merseyside Police and Merseyside Scouts in its development, the aim is to have the game included at the Disability Games in 2021, which are to be hosted in Liverpool, and to bring VI pupils from across the Commonwealth and beyond to be trained by our pupils. Such a peer-tutoring process was piloted in the summer of 2018 with schools (with specific mention of our main reverse inclusion partner All Saints in Anfield), when churches, mosques, Rotarians and Lions helped to fund VI pupils and teachers from Sierra Leone and Indonesia to come and learn our best practices. This is something to be explored further. Although it is wonderful to have the goodwill of interfaith communities come



together to support and invest in our connected VI communities, it is limited in the number of pupils that it can reach. A 'match funding' programme, taking into account outward-going Sightbox funds and inward-coming pupils and teacher funding support with the Department for International Development, for example, offers food for thought and scalable opportunities. Surely there are new trade and innovation opportunities to be cemented, not least of which are those framed by the right for St Vincent's to deliver the mandatory qualification needed to be a teacher of the VI (MQTVI), as granted by the DfE, along with LJMU. The prospect of a new generation of innovation, enterprise and VI outcomes-

focused teaching and learning (and the relevant research) is an internationally exciting one.

Bringing together and embedding in community

At this challenging time, a project illustrating the formula via its individual (confidence) impact and wider opportunities has been shared on www.stvin.com in the 'projects' area for us all to engage with. Past and present enrichment projects are featured for further reflection, alongside peer review publications. The 'Journey for Peace' develops one pupil's reading of his peace essay at the Lions UN Day in New York into seven comics with seven themes (health, happiness,

wisdom, peace, friendship, bravery and justice), connecting creativity in story-writing with iconic Liverpool statues and the Sightbox. VI pupils, who have a deep appreciation of what it can be like to be isolated, have much that they can teach us all.

A best practice 'platform' for VI has been established, with global connections. It can only be imagined how significant the future impact could be if we worked together, investing in our VI children and young people as they (the enlightened) lead the sighted onwards, with an international version of reverse inclusion, both physical and virtual.

Would you like to join us?

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