

The Role of Museums in Art and Design History and Education of Elementary School Students with Special Educational Needs in New York City.

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ABSTRACT: Museums are generally conceived as spaces for the preservation of tangible and intangible heritages. While this is true, museums also serve purposeful educational roles with programs that are not often configured like those of conventional educational institutions. This important educational function of museums is often overlooked, although they serve unique roles that compliment those of educational institutions, sometimes providing structured contents for target student populations. This research examines how museums collaborate to provide art history and education content for students with special educational needs. It adopts students attending an elementary school, and selected students visits to a museum in New York city as its sample population. The findings show how elementary school pupils use museum contents, and the synergy that exists between museum education and educational institutions in New York city. It concludes by recommending other dimensions of collaboration possible between museums and educational institutions for the educational benefits of students with special education needs in New York city.

Keywords: *Art and Design History, Museum Education, Special Education*

I. Background of Study

New York City (NYC) Directorate of Education (DOE) defines special education to include ‘services, programs, and specially designed instruction to meet the individual needs of a student with a disability’. It explains further that students with disabilities who require special education services have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This plan is created by a team which includes the parents of the pupil. The student is enrolled in the public school system in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) providing the child with a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). The IEP is a legal statement showing parents how the state intends to achieve this plan and the role of parents. The New York City DOE in its policy document requires that:

Students with IEPs have access to the general education curriculum and an education with general education peers to the greatest extent possible, and as close to their home as possible, otherwise known as their least restrictive environment. LRE is a commitment that your child will be in schools and classrooms with peers without disabilities for as much of the day as possible. Students may not be removed from the general education setting simply because adaptations, accommodations, or modifications are needed.

NYC has the highest number of public schools and students of all cities in the United States. According to the New York Directorate of Education (NYDOE) data for the 2023-24 school session, there were 912,064 students enrolled in the NYC school system. About 197,006 students representing 21.6 percent of the total student population were students with disabilities under the IEP. The city has over 170 museums serving the educational community, tourists and the public. By their nature, museums share symbiotic connection with educational institutions in their localities. Museums partner with educational institutions especially K-12 in many ways.

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) notes in its museum’s fact data that:

- Museums spend over \$2 billion each year on education activities; the typical museum devotes three-quarters of its education budget to K-12 students.
- Museums receive approximately 55 million visits each year from students in school groups.

- Museums help teach the state and local curricula, tailoring their programs in math, science, art, literacy, language arts, history, civics and government, economics and financial literacy, geography, and social studies.
- Children who visited a museum during kindergarten had higher achievement scores in reading, mathematics, and science in third grade than children who did not. Children who are at risk for deficits and delays in achievement also see this benefit.

Although AAM data does not give insight into the impact of museum visits on students with special educational needs specifically with their visual arts class projects, the data shows impact on the general educational system and why museums remain relevant to arts education.

II. Objectives of the Study

The objectives are to:

1. Study how museum visits in NYC affect students' participation in art and design activities
2. Pay structured visits to a selected museum in New York to see how students engage with museum objects
3. Observe activities available in the museum for elementary school pupils and pupils' response
4. Study how public schools in NYC affect students' participation in art and design education activities
5. Pay structured visits to a selected public school in New York to see how students engage with images of the museum object, and
6. To document the impact of the encounter on school pupils

III. Significance

This study identifies how museum visits and contents impact on the study of art and design history and education by elementary school students with special education plans (IEP's). It examines the synergy that exists between elementary school education and museum educational programs, and how it is beneficial to students on IEP. It discusses how it can be enhanced for greater impact and suggests other practical ways that museums and elementary schools can collaborate further for the interest of elementary school students with special education needs.

IV. Limitation

This research is limited to the observation of students with special education need in one elementary school in Brooklyn as its primary focus, and one museum in Brooklyn. During this period, additional data was collected by interviewing teachers from other schools visiting the museum, and museum staff for the purpose of comparing primary data collected. The study consulted some relevant literature and information from supervisory institutions for the examination of policy statements and structure created for students on IEP and museum education for the purpose of establishing context.

V. Research Method and Data Collection

The research is qualitative in nature. It adopts observation, questionnaire and interview methods as its primary sources of data collection. It also made references to relevant publications and online sources. The field study was carried out over a period of 11 weeks, adopting a public elementary school and a museum, both in Brooklyn, New York as its primary observation points and for data collection. About 60 hours of observation were accomplished at the elementary school during the study, and 12 hours at the museum. Interviews were conducted with art teachers, paraprofessional assistants, and other teachers at the school and the museum premises. A google questionnaire was administered online for digital responses. The questionnaire focused on museum impact on elementary school students on Individual Education Program (IEP) and other special needs. Data generated from all sources were collated, analyzed and presented as observations and findings within the study.

VI. Introduction

The role of museums in art and design history and education has elicited conversations in educational and other literary circles. Al-Radaideh (2012, p. 505) noted that 'Museums are undoubtedly one of the most important learning facilities of society and are a commonly visited and highly valued venue for school excursions.' Commenting further, Al-Radaideh (ibid) observed that learning about art from actual art works in the museum and galleries have come to be viewed as valuable to students at all levels from K-college level. Ovio (2023, p. 1), discussing the role museums play in the arts industry, observed that museums are an important educational resource for people of all ages, offering a variety of educational programs suitable for school arts learning, tourists and the public. Elisafenko et al. (2020, p. 125), also noted that for a long time, we have regarded the museum as a repository of artifacts or natural objects that were recognized as important for preservation, study, and display for each new generation. In its Position Statement on the Benefits of Art Museum Learning in Education (adopted

March 2012; reviewed and revised March 2015; reviewed and revised March 2020), the National Art Education Association (NAEA) believes art museum learning is a fundamental component to a high quality, effective, and balanced education. As one of its policy statements, the American Association of Museums (1992, p. 8), assert that ‘museums place education—in the broadest sense of the word at the center of their public service role.’

Thus, as institutions housing artefacts of important artistic, historical and cultural heritage, museums are institutions which serve diverse educational needs in many facets of learning. This study compares how museums influence interest in art and design history and education among elementary school pupils with special educational needs to the ways in which public schools influence interest.

VII. Field Observation and Interviews (Elementary School)

The primary field observation point of this study is the art classroom of an elementary school in Brooklyn, New York. The school has one art teacher, who teaches 5 art classes daily (Mondays – Fridays), that is 25 classes weekly to about 330 students. 3 of the weekly classes are Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT). The class size is about 18 to 24 students, and consists of 60-70% of general education students, and 30-40% of students in individualized educational plans (IEP's). Another 3 classes weekly are devoted to teaching ‘horizon’. Horizons are classes devoted to students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). They are smaller classes of about 6 to 9 students. The students are accompanied by 3-4 paraprofessionals to the art classroom.



ICT pupils in an art classroom on Halloween day

About 5 video clips and / or digital photographs were shown daily, 1 for each class at the beginning of the lecture before the actual practical activities are engaged by the students. At least 1 (20%) of the videos or photographs shown are taken from a museum website, while the others are from art blogs, digital exhibits, artist's web pages and other sites. The choice of videos or photographs for the class activity of the day depends on the objectives of each lesson plan. Observation shows that the video clips and digital photographs of art works helped students to understand the entire concept of the activity to be engaged in for the class. The art teacher also used it as a reference during practical class activities.

Special education students observed did not respond much differently from other students when videos or photographs were shown in class, often paying attention, although 1 or 2 may spontaneously ask questions while the presentation is on. During the practical activity for the class, many special education students did their class projects excitedly with additional guidance from the art teacher and paraprofessionals present. The ICT students who were asked questions about the videos shown by the art teacher were able to discuss clearly what they saw or observed as it relates to the class project. All the paraprofessionals interviewed agree that the videos and photographs shown at the beginning of the classes help to inspire the students with special educational needs as did the regular students irrespective of the video source.

The interview with the art teacher was informal, often during lunch breaks and before art classes began in the morning. He emphasized that videos were very useful to all his classes to help students understand the concept, but it particularly helps to keep the attention of IEP students at the beginning of the class. He also remarked that the attention span of students in the horizon classes was short. That explains why for those classes, video clips are shorter, and practical class activity are tailored to the interests of each student. The art teacher has not organized any of his classes to attend an exhibition or visit the museum since he began his career as an art teacher. He explained that art teachers in public schools are scheduled to teach multiple classes of various grade levels each workday, and that a visit to the museum with any class would significantly impact the functioning of

the school for that day. However, he noted that some class teachers may have visited the museum with their students.

Paraprofessionals who accompany IEP students to their art classes were also interviewed. They all noted that their students are usually excited about art classes, and they talk about their art projects outside the art class. Some of the paraprofessionals have accompanied IEP (ICT and horizon) classes in other subjects for a museum visit. Some paraprofessionals observed that the museum trip was quite recreational for students on IEP. The IEP students asked a lot of questions during museum visits, and some draw museum objects they could remember in their notebooks.

VIII. Field Observation and Interviews (Museum)

The museum observation took place at a museum in New York city. 3 museum officials were interviewed. Within the museum, elementary school teachers and paraprofessionals who had accompanied students for museum visits were interviewed as well. The teachers and paraprofessionals interviewed all agree that museum visits were beneficial to their students. They noted that their special education students showed the same level of interest as the general education students during museum visits. When asked what type of museum collection attracted the attention of special education students the most, 2 noted that ceramic arts and jewelry collection seems to be a special interest, although that may be due to their similarity to objects, they see at home.

Regarding what impact museum visits have on their art projects back at school, none of the teachers interviewed could be specific (since they are not art teachers) but noted that the visits are good for students' wellbeing and all-round educational development. The students would normally talk about the visit for a long time during the term and have the tendency to want to relate art projects to the museum objects encountered, or to use those as reference in their independent class projects. Sometimes, the students are given assignments that relate to their visit to the museum in other classes apart from art or may be asked to talk about their museum experience. Students can vividly recall their visit and historical contents of many objects encountered in the museum.

The museum staff interviewed spoke largely about the staff's role in facilitating guided tours of the museum if invited. They also spoke about educational programs and art activities available for elementary school students. The museum sends out newsletters which contain activities of interest to students and their educational institutions. The museum has accessible entrances and exits which ensure students with different accessibility needs have access to the museum. The audio-video screens at various spaces are interactive, making connection with the museum objects possible for students requiring such facilities.

Pre-arranged school visits are encouraged to enable designated staff to assist the students visiting on the museum tour and for special exhibitions. There are a few activities available for students on special education programs, including children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Some of these activities are regular, while others are periodically planned programs for holidays. For visits by students on special education, the museum requires that a teacher and paraprofessionals for the special education students be present for the visit.

IX. Online Questionnaire

An online google questionnaire was administered to art teachers and museum staff by email. Responses did not present information different from what was obtained by direct and informal interviews. The study therefore relied on the other sources mainly for its data and analysis.

X. Observation and Findings

The study observed that there have been mutual relationships between museums and educational institutions. Museums devote a significant part of their income to providing educational content and programs for students. The Museum has several programs and activities for students at elementary school age. The programs and activities are planned and implemented through the Children's Museum. Many of the children's programs are inquiry-based, immersive and interdisciplinary, and conform with New York State Learning Standards-aligned school programs. They include programs that highlight visual arts, natural science, world cultures, advocacy, and activism. Apart from the educational objectives of the children's museum, the programs are structured to create memorable experiences for the students. Educators can utilize the museum's collection of cultural artefacts, live animals, science specimens and permanent exhibits for their programs.

Museum contents such as images and videos are commonly used at the art classes of elementary schools for instruction. As earlier observed, these serve as inspiration and references for the students as they articulate the concepts presented by the art teacher. Museums have a wider collection of physical objects which create opportunities for students to physically encounter, make connections and learn their history. The teachers and paraprofessionals interviewed observed students' interest in visual arts increase after museum visits, although they also have similar observations with the student's interest and performance in other school subjects as well.

The study observed that many museum staff show unwillingness to take part in online surveys or questionnaires that are designed to assess the museums' influence and impact on students with special education needs. Questionnaires administered online to elementary school teachers had similar responses as well. Significant

information was gotten from elementary school teachers and paraprofessionals visiting the Museum with their students onsite. Information was also gotten from non-educational staff of the museum.

XI. Analysis of Observation

The study shows that the exposure of special education students in elementary school to art museum collections has significant influence on the interest of students in visual arts school projects and understanding of art history. The exposure may be in the use of museum images and videos for teaching in the art classrooms of the schools, museum visits or children's art programs in the museum. The study also shows that many art teachers do not organize museum visits during the regular term periods because of their schedule at the various schools. Educational programs offered by museums include guided tours, art-making activities and art discussion classes for school groups that align with the school's curriculum of that locality. Jones (2019, p. 50); and Burchenal & Grohe (2007, p. 75) also noted this in their study. While the school system has a formal method of evaluating art projects, museum art activities encourage interest, recreation and education in an informal way.

Evaluating the degree of students' art learning in museums is problematic because they are informal experiential modes of education not configured for direct assessment. This was also observed by Brajčić & Kuscevic (2022, p. 32), while noting that museum education does not have the characteristics of formal education, but this is not necessary, because in the museum, the learning process itself is more important than the outcomes. Museums approach learning in a variety of ways. The environment of a museum is replete with artefacts and other contemporary works of art which help to stimulate interest in elementary school students. Brown (2021, p. 123) observed that this encounter with art can spark imagination and motivation to create arts works of their own. Thus, the art classroom becomes a channel for actualizing the desire for self-expression and creativity. Museums often encourage students to ask questions and think deeply about what they see (Smith, 2020, p. 70). This is important in the development of observational and critical thinking skills, essential in the educational development of elementary school students.

The diversity and variety of art objects in museums also exposes and broadens students' understanding and appreciation of art (Jones, *Ibid*, p. 45). Cury (2007, p. 911) emphasizes that the educational potential of museums lies in communicating a wide range of content in a dynamic and interactive way. The diversity of museum objects creates a respect for the arts of other cultures, and the awareness is important for embracing diversity and inclusion in multi-racial classrooms such as Brooklyn's. Brown (*ibid*, p. 130) and Vallance (2004, p.90), believes this is also important for a well-rounded education. Many museums provide interactive formats and platforms for some of their exhibits. This allows students with diverse educational and special needs to engage with the exhibits, reinforce classroom learning and make abstract concepts more tangible (Smith, 2020, p. 67; Hein, 1998, p. 45).

The data from teachers interviewed shows that the effect of museum visits on students with special education programs is multi-disciplinary, affecting their interests in other subjects in the arts and sciences as well. This is to be expected as many museums are multicultural and interdisciplinary. Many museum visits are structured for general education and recreation, not maximizing interest in visual arts, although museums create and structure contents that inspire young people of various needs and accessibility which supplement art teaching in elementary schools. The programs of Children's Museum in art history and education for instance, are structured in line with New York State's educational goals, and hence can be said to positively augment art teaching in Brooklyn's elementary schools. Teachers interviewed agree that special education students are more willing to engage with projects that have been introduced to them through interaction with physical samples at the museum or by digital means in the classroom. This places the interaction with museum content as complimentary and supplementary to classroom teaching of art to elementary school students with special education programs.

XII. Conclusion

In summation, the study examined the effect of museums' content and visit in the teaching of art history and education to students with special education plans. It approached the study as an observational essay, with interviews and consultation of other literary contents. The study establishes the relevance and influence of museums on the teaching of art to students with special education needs at the elementary school level. The study also shows that the museum observed has generalized programs for students with special education plans. The study proposes that museums work more closely with paraprofessionals in elementary schools to develop more plan specific content for students with various spectrums of Autism and other special needs. It suggests that more than one art teacher is employed in elementary schools to create opportunities for planning art objects, and art history centered visits to museums on a regular basis because of the educational benefits for the students. It also advocates that museums encourage programs which can take their educational and art historical contents to schools in the form of loan kits and carefully curated digital contents that target students with special education plans at the elementary school level.

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