People with learning disabilities and access to mainstream arts and culture: A participatory action research approach

**Nicola Gratton**

**Staffordshire University**

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**Accessible summary**

* Ten people with learning disabilities were trained to work with a university to carry out research about people with learning disabilities, arts and culture.
* They spoke to 82 people with learning disabilities to find out what gets in the way of attending arts and culture activities.
* The research found that transport, cost and needing support often got in the way of people being able to go to activities and people needed to feel safe and welcomed when they attend an arts and culture activity.
* It was found that including more people with learning disabilities in making decisions about art and culture could help more people attend activities. It was also found that involving more people with learning disabilities in training people who work in arts and culture could help people feel safe when they go to activities.

**Abstract**

*Background*

Arts and culture have proven benefits. However, access to arts and culture is not consistent. For people with learning disabilities, arts and culture is often considered a therapeutic activity and therefore the needs of people with learning disabilities in accessing mainstream arts and culture are often overlooked. This research explores how people with learning disabilities experience culture, the barriers they experience in accessing it and how cultural sector organisations can improve access to their activities and events.

*Methods*

A participatory action research approach was adopted for the study. Interviews and focus groups were conducted. The findings were analysed and resulting themes discussed with the peer research team. The group codelivered a workshop aimed at representatives from the cultural sector to share their findings.

*Results*

The results from the focus groups and interviews indicted that for people with learning disabilities, community is central to their experience of arts and culture. The study found that transport, cost and needing support to attend cultural activities were barriers to access, whereas consideration of physical access and ‘emotional access’ needs improved access for people with learning disabilities. Recommendations include improved consultation with people with learning disabilities about cultural opportunities and the formation part of cocreated training delivered with people with learning disabilities to support cultural sector staff to offer a warm and safe environment.

*Conclusions*

The findings from the study provided useful learning for cultural sector organisations. However, both the findings of the research and the process of participatory action research were noted as being significant for how the cultural sector can build an ethos of inclusivity to ensure their offer is relevant and accessible to people with learning disabilities.

**Keywords**

Arts

Culture

Participatory action research

People with learning disabilities

Collaboration

Coproduction of research

**Background**

Participation in arts and culture has a significant impact on health and wellbeing (Castora-Binkley et al, 2010; All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017), educational attainment (Mason, Steedy, and Thormann, 2008), social inclusion (Arts Council England, 2004) and prosperity (Oakley, Ball and Cunningham 2018). While arts and cultural activity are recognised as having a positive impact on people's lives and society, participation in these activities is variable across the UK population (Arts Council England, 2018). The concepts of 'democratization of culture' or increasing access of a broader section of society to cultural activity, and 'cultural democracy', or more people being able to curate and determine culture, have been influential in the development of community arts and cultural policy in the UK (Webster and Buglass, 2005; Matarasso and Landry, 1999). In recent years this has been reflected in the development of high profile and strategic national programmes that aim to increase participation in the arts for people from non-traditional backgrounds (see for example Creative People and Places, 2015).

Although it is acknowledged that diversity within the arts and cultural landscape can "contribute to the long term health of the arts" (Arts Council England, 2018, pg. 2) and support social mobility, people with disabilities and people from Black or Minority Ethnic backgrounds continue to have lower engagement in the arts and cultural activity than the general population, and are underrepresented in the arts and culture workforce (Arts Council England, 2017; Arts Council England, 2018; Oakley, Ball and Cunningham, 2018). A report commissioned in 2010 by UK Government’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Charlton et al, 2010) indicated people widely experienced a range of practical, personal and psychological barriers to accessing art, cultural and sporting activity. Psychological factors, such as fears over social etiquette and elitism, and practical factors such as cost, transport and timings, were reasons given for non-engagement in arts events. However, although there were some differences in perceived barriers between different age groups, the barriers were applicable to the population of the UK as a whole, not specific sub-groups in society, which does not account for these disparities in participation and engagement. Using a participatory action research approach, this study gains insight into the barriers experienced by people with learning disabilities in accessing mainstream arts and cultural activities and explores how the research process itself impacted on the peer researchers involved and cultural sector with whom they shared the findings.

**Review of the literature**

Literature on the experiences of people with learning disabilities in relation to their engagement with mainstream arts and cultural activity is limited and tends instead to focus on the therapeutic benefits of participation in arts activity, such as drama therapy (Worth, 2010). In 2002, Reynolds investigated existing opportunities for people with learning disabilities to engage in creative leisure time occupations. The study found that managers of community homes for people with learning disabilities felt that, while there were some opportunities for people with learning disabilities to participate in art activities, such as painting and listening to music, there was a dependency on specialist units, such as day centres, to initiate and deliver these. The study also identified a number of barriers to accessing creative leisure time, including cost, transport and a reliance on staff support in order to engage with the activity.

While the findings from this research are useful learning, the cultural activity in question was localised to settings used by people with learning disabilities and focused on individual or small group activity. Lemos & Crane (2015) argue that despite a wide range of high-quality specialist disability arts organizations, accessibility to mainstream arts and culture for people with learning disabilities is patchy. As a result, not only do people with learning disabilities risk increased vulnerability to loneliness and prejudice, but also miss opportunities for inspiration and expression. Lemos & Crane point out, "these are significant, sometimes even formative experiences for many people – from which adults with learning disabilities should not be excluded" (Lemos & Crane, pg 8). Although recent initiatives in England have aimed to increase access to culture and widen participation of more excluded groups, (Arts Council England, 2018) there has been little debate of how people with learning disabilities either consume or produce mainstream arts and culture.

Disability arts has been credited with challenging the role of arts and culture in the reproduction of a disablist society and “fighting back against a disability culture [by getting more people with disabilities involved in] cultural production” (Campbell and Oliver, 1996, p.111). However, the movement has also been criticised for reinforcing the conventional norms of society. As Darke (2003, p.133) argues, in some cases activity that passes as disability arts are “nothing to do with disability arts, but to do with traditional preconceptions of art or therapy or, worse, as some form of inspirational role modelling”. While diversifying cultural production can lead to a reimagining of high arts and culture through which the artistic talents and experiences of people with disabilities are made visible is valuable to both artists and society as a whole, the disability arts movement alone has not addressed the relatively low numbers of people with learning disabilities accessing mainstream arts and cultural activities. Responsibility for addressing this imbalance must therefore also lie with the social conditions and infrastructures available within the existing habitus of arts and culture. Without a deliberate recognition that the existing structures exclude people with learning disabilities, the opportunities for people with learning disabilities to even attend, let alone shape, mainstream cultural activity will continue to be limited.

The limited inquiry into arts and cultural access for people with learning disabilities has largely relied upon participation from carers and managers of services to inform the research, not people with disabilities themselves (see for example Reynolds, 2007). A social model of disability (Oliver, 2009, Oliver and Barnes, 2012) asserts that environmental and societal barriers experienced by people with disabilities limit access and inclusion (Durell, 2016), and therefore assessing the first hand challenges experienced by people with learning disabilities in accessing cultural activity can offer important learning for cultural sector organisations, as well as other sectors committed to inclusive practice. Crucially, involving people with learning disabilities as partners in the research process can provide an insight into the challenges of accessing mainstream arts and culture, and potential solutions to these, from the perspective of people with lived experience of learning disabilities.

This research formed part of a larger community consultation on the meaning of culture for residents of Stoke-on-Trent, a post-industrial city in the West Midlands. It takes an inclusive approach, using a participatory action research approach through which people with learning disabilities were trained as peer researchers and supported throughout the research process as coproducers of knowledge. The research was informed by the peer researchers’ recognition of the importance of arts and culture consumption for their health and wellbeing (Castora-Binkley et al, 2010; All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017) and social inclusion (Arts Council England, 2004) and the challenges they had experienced in accessing mainstream arts and culture. The participatory action research approach also addressed their desire to support local cultural organisations to understand the access needs of people with learning disabilities. Both the larger community consultation and this specific research with people with learning disabilities were approved by the university ethics committee.

**Research** **questions**

The aim of the research was to determine the perceptions of culture for people with learning disabilities and the needs of the group in relation to accessing and engaging in mainstream arts and cultural activity. Participants were also asked to identify recommendations to mainstream arts and cultural sector organisation to improve access for people with learning disabilities This research took place as part of a wider initiative to assess the general population’s perceptions of culture and the general barriers to accessing arts and cultural activity, and therefore this was reflected in the research questions. These were:

* What does culture mean to you?
* What gets in the way of you experiencing arts and cultural activities?
* What can be done to make sure everyone can take part in mainstream arts and cultural activities?

To ensure the questions were meaningful and understandable to all participants, the lead researchers, supported by a small number of the peer researcher team reviewed the questions and added further supporting questions. These can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Additional supporting questions for participants with learning disabilities.

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| --- | --- |
| Question | Additional supporting questions |
| What does culture mean to you? | What is culture?  What activities do you like doing?  How do you feel about this city?  Who do you like going out with?  Where do you like going? |
| What gets in the way of you experiencing cultural activities? | What gets in the way of you accessing culture?  What stops you from going out?  Do you know what is out there to go to?  Is it too expensive to go out?  Do you need support to go out?  Do you know how to get to places? |
| What can be done to make sure everyone can take part? | What does the cultural sector in the city need to do to make sure everyone can take part?  What can help people to take part?  What support can people with learning disabilities have? |

**Method**

**Participatory Action Research**

This study adopts a collaborative approach (Bigby and Frawley, 2015), utilising participatory action research (PAR) through which people with learning disabilities take an active role in understanding how people with learning disabilities access arts and cultural activity, and the challenges and barriers they experience in doing so. PAR is a research methodology underpinned by ethical principles including participation of community researchers, inclusion of groups traditionally excluded from the research process, transparency and action focused research (Gratton and Beddows, 2018; McIntyre, 2008). PAR advocates the use of accessible and engaging data collection techniques, referred to here as creative consultation techniques, which enable people traditionally excluded from informing research findings by offering participants alternative, non-written or non-verbal ways of providing feedback (Gratton and Beddows, 2018; Kara, 2015). In this way data collection is responsive to the needs of participants and may vary across the sample. The process is non-linear enabling a flexible and responsive approach to research in which peer researchers can adapt the focus of focus of inquiry or consultation techniques to meet the needs of the group and the emerging findings (McIntyre, 2008).

PAR engages people from the ‘community of interest’ in the research process as 'community' or 'peer' researchers. While professional or academic researchers may act as coaches or facilitators in a PAR study (Whyte, 1991, cited in Walter, 2008), the process is a collaboration with the peer researchers who are actively engaged in planning, question design, data collection and analysis, action planning and reporting (McIntyre, 2007). The approach challenges the assumption of academics or professionals as experts and acknowledges the unique and in-depth understanding individuals have of their own experience, challenging power inequalities between ‘researchers’ and people who are the subject of inquiry (Walter, 2009).

Given the variable needs of the participants in this study, the flexibility offered by a PAR approach was a significant advantage to the researcher team. In addition, PAR offered an appropriate methodology to address the relative lack of research on the engagement of people with learning disabilities with cultural activity and the low levels of participation of people with learning disabilities in the curation of culture. People with learning disabilities were recruited as peer researchers and variable creative consultation techniques were adopted depending on the verbal and written abilities of research participants. The research was led by a university researcher experienced in the PAR methodology and codelivered with a coordinator from Asist.

**Peer Researchers**

Ten peer researchers were recruited to deliver the research, five men and five women, with an age range of between 18 and 60. All were white British and lived in Stoke-on-Trent. All peer researchers were recruited through Asist, an advocacy service for people with learning disabilities. Seven peer researchers were members of the advocacy service, two were community champions who were previous users of the advocacy service and one was recruited through Asist’s connection with a community radio station. The peer researchers’ experiences of arts and culture were variable. Two peer researchers had founded their own local drama group for people with learning disabilities in Stoke-on-Trent and one was a DJ on a community radio station presented and produced by people with learning disabilities. Other members of the group had experience of taking part in arts activities in therapeutic settings.

Training for peer researchers ensures consistent delivery of research and therefore is vital to the PAR process (Liamputtong and Higgingbottom, 2015). Peer researchers in this study were invited to a two-day induction which introduced an outline of the research, the broad research questions and the context of the consultation. The induction was adapted from a participatory action research short course, called Get Talking (Emadi-Coffin, 2008; Gratton and Beddows, 2018), designed by the university research team. The amended induction session was codesigned between the university researcher and the coordinator at Asist to ensure the research process was both robust and accessible to the peer researchers. The sessions also enabled the group to practice interviewing techniques and to respond to the research questions as participants, providing an opportunity for experiential reflection on the process. The facilitators of the induction codesigned information and consent sheets with some peer researchers which provided details of the purpose of the study, the research process and the questions. These were accessible, user friendly and used large font, clear words and pictures. The information sheets provided the peer researcher team with a visual and consistent way of informing research participants about the study. This coproduction of the induction programme and the information for participants ensured both peer researchers and staff at Asist felt ownership over the research and peer researchers were provided with the information they required to fully engage in the research process.

**The research participants**

The peer researchers conducted semi structured interviews or focus groups with 82 participants in total. The PAR process presented some challenges to collecting detailed data for each participant. The decision was taken not gather in depth data regarding the participants due to additional expectation this placed on the peer researchers, the extensive time it took to collect such data and concerns this would detract from the informal, conversational nature of research. Therefore, although some general participant information was gleaned from the peer research and Asist teams, the research team was unable to conduct any in depth analysis of how people with different types, and severity, of learning disability access and experience the arts.

An indirect consequence of having a limited understanding of the research sample is that people with profound learning disabilities are excluded from the research. In addition, the reliance in this study on carers and support staff to provide access to willing participants means that this study is at risk of inadvertently only including participants considered ‘capable’ of engaging with the research questions or those considered interested in arts and culture by their carers. However, the research team felt that it was important for both peer researchers and participant that the interviews and focus groups were brokered by a member of staff familiar to the participants.

The majority of the participants were known to the peer researchers, although two peer researchers interviewed a total of five people who were unknown to them prior to the project. Peer researchers and Asist staff reported that research participants had learning disabilities ranging from mild to severe and some had physical disabilities. Some individuals also had a dual diagnosis including autism. All participants received daily or weekly support ranging from support with daily living tasks to full time residential care, and all attended a day opportunity service facilitated by social care staff. Most research participants were people with effective expressive and receptive verbal communication, although one person, who did not have verbal expression was encouraged to participate using pre-selected illustrations and their own drawings.

**The research process**

Six focus groups and four semi structured interviews were conducted. The peer research team were supported through the process by three advocates from Asist who initiated contact with services and coordinated the meetings. In addition, staff from the support services were also available to support the specific needs of the research participants.

Focus groups and interviews took place in settings familiar to the participants and were variable in length depending on the participants’ interaction with the research questions. Data was usually recorded by the advocates supporting the peer researchers who made notes on flipchart paper to ensure there was a visual record of the discussion. However, some peer researchers wanted to record their own detailed notes and therefore, for some interviews, the advocate’s notes were supported by more detailed notes from a peer researcher. A small number of participants needed to provide feedback in non-verbal ways and therefore illustrations and photographs were provided through which participants could select their responses from a range of pre-selected categories based on the emerging themes from the research. Notes were taken of the responses and added to the broader data set.

The peer researchers reported feeling nervous about the prospect of discussing arts and culture with their peers, although the connection to the wider community consultation gave them a degree of confidence. On the whole the group found the focus groups easier to conduct than the interviews as they felt participants in the interviews had less to say, whereas the focus group setting provided more prompts from within the group itself.

A thematic analysis of findings was carried out by the university lead researcher and the themes shared and checked with the peer researcher team. This provided an opportunity to discuss the findings, clarify the themes, set a series of recommendations, identify the audience for the findings and how they should be shared. A short and clear report (Gratton, Corcoran and Reach, 2018) aimed at the mainstream arts and cultural sector was produced which was launched via a workshop co-delivered by the lead university researcher and peer researchers. 25 representatives from the local cultural sector attended the workshop. The workshop used the lived experiences of the peer researchers as a means of presenting the research findings and recommendations. In addition, a clear words and pictures report was produced and shared with research participants and support staff.

**Results**

The findings from the research identify how people with learning disabilities define culture and the barriers they experience in accessing mainstream arts and cultural activities.

The research questions were deliberately open, encouraging participants to define ‘culture’ for themselves. Participants did not necessarily identify culture with arts and were more likely to discuss culture in relation to other types of activity such as “going out for shopping and day trips,” sport, faith and food. Feeling connected to the local area was also central to many participants’ understandings of culture, providing a sense of security and the opportunity to access activities, “I know Stoke, I grew up here and know my way round. There are lots of activities for me.” Where arts attendance was mentioned, theatre and visits to museums were the activities that participants most identified with. Some participants discussed their own production of art, such as drama, photography and crafts, many of which were therapeutic activities provided by the support services they used. Both peer researchers and participants recognised the value of their participation in arts and cultural activities as a therapeutic or individualised activity.

Social interaction was central to the participants’ understanding of culture. “Being part of the community” or a group and being with others was an important feature of culture, not only in providing an avenue through which they learned of opportunities but also offering support to make their way to venues and feel safe once there, “Being part of a group… I’m less scared now and feel more confident because I came over to this country from Pakistan.” This suggests that the concept of culture for people with learning disabilities cannot be removed from individuals’ social circles. For the peer researchers, improved access to mainstream arts and cultural activity for people with learning disabilities was an important means of becoming embedded into a community, one that values art for its aesthetic and artistic qualities, not as a tool to reinforce the perception that people with learning disabilities need either occupying, mending or treated as ‘other’. As a result of this, peer researchers argued for people with learning disabilities to be considered as audiences for mainstream arts and cultural activity, not merely singled out for specialist arts interventions.

Research participants identified a range of physical, environmental and social barriers to accessing mainstream arts and culture. Transport, or lack of a reliable form of transport was identified as a barrier, which reflected the findings of the wider community consultation. However, there are often specific issues relating to transport for people with learning disabilities, especially when as one participant states, people with learning disabilities often “need support to go [to cultural venues].” Only one of the peer researchers and none of the participants in our study owned their own form of transport and therefore relied on either public transport, family members or carers to attend arts and cultural venues. Specialist transport was required in some cases, which brought an additional cost, and some participants reported times when they were denied access to a bus service because there was no space for their wheelchair when the service had been full. For the one peer researcher with their own transport, they required detailed instructions on directions, parking availability, cost and what to expect upon arrival before feeling able to visit a new venue.

Changes to Personal Independence Payments in England have resulted in a reduced income for many of the participants in this study, impacting on their ability to prioritise arts and cultural activities in their overall budgets in the light of cultural activity being “too expensive [with] prices going up.” For some, where Power of Attorney had been awarded to another person, the participants found arguing the case for money to spend on mainstream arts and cultural activity difficult. In a number of cases, participants indicated the cost of attending activities or venues such as the theatre, was inflated due to their support needs for a carer. In such cases, the participants were required to pay the cost of their carer’s ticket, in effect doubling the cost for a person with a learning disability to experience the same event as the wider population. Several larger arts venues offer a carer a free ticket when accompanying a person with a disability. However, for the peer researchers and participants in this research, this experience was not common, and some were unaware that this provision could be made. Issues of cost, transport and reliance on a carer to access cultural opportunities reflect findings from other studies (Reynolds, 2002; Charlton et al, 2010).

The findings also suggest that not considering the access needs of people with learning disabilities can negatively impact on their arts and cultural activity engagement. Research participants indicated both physical and ‘emotional access’ can sometimes be restrictive. Physical access to arts and culture included making reasonable adjustments to buildings, such as ramps, accessible toilets and changing facilities. In addition to physical access, participants identified the need for ‘emotional accessibility’ at cultural events and venues. Participants were concerned about their safety, with both participants and peer researchers having experienced bullying, violence or threatening behaviour because of their learning disability. Peer researchers felt that cultural sector organisations could improve feelings of safety for people with learning disabilities through the creation of a welcoming and friendly environment through staff training and increasing the opportunities for “more people who understand people with disabilities.”

The findings indicate a general lack of understanding of the specific needs of people with learning disabilities or the challenges they experience when accessing mainstream arts and culture. This, combined with the participants’ lack of identification with the arts and a perceived need for cultural venues to be ‘emotionally accessible’, led the peer researchers to identify two core recommendations for the cultural sector, both centred around the themes of increased inclusion and participation.

Firstly, peer researchers recommended cultural sector organisations should regularly and consistently consult with people with learning disabilities to understand the interests of people with learning disabilities as well and the accessibility of their cultural offer. An ethos of inclusivity should be developed within the arts and cultural sector through which people with learning disabilities should be included in decision making. Coproduction of art and encouraging people with disabilities to work with artists and as artists to produce work that is relevant to people with learning disabilities is one way this could be done. However, for the peer researchers and the participants in this study even to be asked their opinion and interests in relation to arts and culture would be a small step in the right direction.

Secondly, emotionally accessible venues were a priority for the peer researchers, offering safe spaces and a friendly welcome for people with learning disabilities. Training for the cultural sector was identified as one way in which this could be addressed. Peer researchers were keen to ensure that people with learning disabilities were part of the delivery team for staff training for cultural sector organisations, with their real-world experiences being a means of supporting staff to understand how to create a welcoming environment for people with learning disabilities.

**Discussion**

According to Darke (2003, pg. 141) the disability arts movement, whose aim “was never to be part of hegemony or normality (mainstream art culture)” but to redefine what ‘normality’, or mainstream art and culture is, argues that “the art establishment...has played an important role in the social and cultural exclusion of disabled people”(Darke, pg. 132). Given this study indicates that culture for people with learning disabilities is defined more in terms of social activities than art, then there is an argument that the definition and expectation of ‘high art’ should change to enable more people with learning disabilities to identify with it. This research proposes therefore that promoting more equitable access to existing mainstream culture and challenging the norms of a disabling society are not mutually exclusive. Responsibility for improved access to mainstream culture for people with learning disabilities should lie with the art establishment through the identification of, and challenges, to the exclusive structures, practices and barriers which can only be achieved through open dialogue with people with disabilities at the receiving end of exclusion.

An increase in the numbers of people with learning disabilities able to access mainstream arts and cultural activity will result in changed attitudes towards this marginalised and often excluded group. Aiden and McCarthy’s (2014) report for SCOPE demonstrates that in the UK, two thirds (67%) of the British public feel uncomfortable talking to disabled people and one fifth (21%) of 18 – 34 years old admit that they have avoided talking to a person with a disability because they weren’t sure how to communicate with them. Equally, a quarter (24%) of people with disabilities have experienced attitudes or behaviours where other people expected less of them because of their disability. As Watson (2003) suggests, it is such prejudice that results in oppression of people with learning disabilities and creates segregation. Aiden and McCarthy (2014) argue that greater inclusion in mainstream activity and more opportunities for people with disabilities and those without disabilities to interact is the way to challenge such prejudice, fear and as participants in Watson’s (2003, p.49) study describe as ‘ignorance’. This need is evident in the findings of this study through the peer researchers desire to be ‘part of community’.

The participatory action research approach, adapted from the Get Talking methodology (Emadi-Coffin, 2008, Gratton and Beddows, 2018) and adopted for this study emphasises inclusion as a core principle. Working with peer researchers with learning disabilities, and working in collaboration with Asist, this study aimed to not only reach participants with lived experience of learning disability, but also challenge the assumptions surrounding arts, culture and ‘expertise’. While the findings from this research were welcomed by local and regional cultural sector organisations, it was the collaborative approach adopted for the research, and the coproduced workshop to disseminate the findings that enabled people with learning disabilities to be an active part of the research process, as peer researchers and participants, and enhanced the volume of the key messages. Indeed, for many attendees of the workshop, it was the first time they had spoken to people with learning disabilities about arts and culture. Feedback from the event indicated that attendees recognised the inclusive approach adopted was “the start of a journey to improve access to culture and begin to make big changes”. Inclusion of the peer researchers in the design and delivery of the dissemination event demonstrated how people with learning disabilities can take a lead in decision making and offer a valuable contribution to cultural sector organisations when designing their cultural offer.

Adopting an established Get Talking PAR methodology, while ensuring the inclusion of peer researchers went beyond mere tokenistic involvement, was time consuming for the university researcher, Asist staff and the peer researchers themselves. Each stage of the research process took longer than originally envisioned to ensure the variable needs of the group were accommodated and supported. Crucially however, the time invested in building trust between the university researcher and the peer researchers and ensuring the peer researchers felt they had ‘permission’ to take a lead in the research, resulted positive outcomes for peer researchers, staff and the cultural sector alike.

The impact of the approach on the peer researchers, the participants and support staff was noted by the peer researchers. Although at times the research process was challenging, with some experiencing some nervousness at the time of the interviews and focus groups, all peer researchers stated that the experience had been a positive one. Working in a team and being supported by Asist helped to overcome initial anxieties and members of the team reported feeling “happy”, “proud” and “helpful” due to their involvement. The peer researchers identified that participants were more likely to respond positively to them in interviews and focus groups than university researchers because they had a shared experience of living with a learning disability, “[It is] better for people with learning disabilities [to do it]… They would talk to us but... [they would find it harder to talk] to you.”

The greatest impact on individual peer researchers was on their confidence. The peer researchers and advocate staff supporting them felt that their presence as peer researchers in support setting for people with learning disabilities challenged the perceptions of them, from both staff and participants. They commented that they had been considered experts, as having an in-depth understanding of the issue. Equally they reported how their involvement with the project had given them confidence to counteract some carers’ low expectations of their ability to act independently in the peer researcher role. They were able to challenge the perception of them as in need of external intervention and take control of a group setting in which, “I spoke up to [a member of support] staff and said ‘I don’t need help with this.’”

This research provides insight into the under investigated area of how people with lived experiences of learning disabilities access and experience arts and culture as audience members and as active members of their wider community. Both the findings and the PAR process were instrumental in challenging the cultural sector and other service providers to reimagine their offer from the perspective of people with learning disabilities. Further research into the participants’ consumption of arts and culture over time, from childhood to adulthood and in the context of several years’ of austerity measures and cuts to the cultural sector in the UK, would add to our understanding of how to support lifelong access to arts and culture for people with learning disabilities.

Equally, although a small number of people with severe learning disabilities were included in this study as participants, further research into how people with severe and profound learning disabilities access and experience arts for their aesthetic qualities rather than their therapeutic benefits, will further enable the cultural sector to engage a diverse range of people with people with learning disabilities as audience members. Some adaptations were made to support people without verbal communication to engage in this research. Further consideration to how non-verbal feedback, drawings and illustrations are interpreted and analysed as part of the PAR process would be beneficial to enhance the ability of similar research to reach, and meaningfully engage, participants with severe and profound learning disabilities.

**Conclusion**

This study adopted a collaborative approach (Bigby and Fawley, 2015) using participatory action research through which people with learning disabilities became cocreators, alongside the lead researcher, of the knowledge generated through the study. However, both the findings of the research and the process of participatory action research was noted as having an impact on local services. The participatory approach adopted for this study, therefore, not only produced findings about people with learning disabilities and their access to arts and culture but also provided the peer researchers, participants, support staff and cultural sector representatives with a clear understanding of the need to involve people with learning disabilities in consultation, decision making and providing training to make venues and spaces ‘emotionally accessible’. Moreover, it provided those stakeholders with a model of how this could be achieved. Through this inclusive approach peer researchers were able to challenge the norm of arts and culture and people’s rights to access mainstream and to challenge it from within. The research process, and codelivery of the workshop, sent a message to arts and cultural providers that inclusion of people with learning disabilities enhances our understanding of culture and that the assumption that people with learning disabilities will be unable to contribute (Aiden and McCarthy, 2014) is a fallacy.

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