

Reynolds, F. (2002) A survey of opportunities and barriers to creative leisure activity for people with learning disabilities. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 30 (2), 63-67.

Abstract:

This study examines an aspect of lifestyle that has received little attention, namely creative arts leisure occupations, and explores the opportunities and barriers to participation that confront community-dwelling adults with learning disabilities. A survey of managers of 34 residential homes in two major UK cities was carried out (reflecting a 54% return rate). They reported that art activities (including painting, and pottery) were the most commonly available form of creative leisure occupation, and drama the least available. Creative occupations tended to occur in specialist settings such as day centres and a minority of residents participated in mainstream community groups and environments. Managers perceived the major barrier to creative leisure participation to be expense (for the activity itself and the support staff). Further barriers included insufficient staff to accommodate individual's personal interests, transport problems, and unwelcoming community resources/attitudes. The results indicate that many residents can engage in art, either within mainstream and specialist resources. Other active creative pursuits are not as accessible. Given its dependency on the voluntary return of questionnaires, the survey may have provided a benign view of creative leisure provision. Even so, the barriers that were identified confirm some continuing problems with accessing community/ mainstream facilities.

Introduction:

Leisure occupations are more than 'time-fillers' (Simons 1995). People with learning disabilities may experience poor self-image and behavioural problems not necessarily as a direct outcome of cognitive impairment, but from living a life with restricted opportunities for pleasurable and meaningful occupation. Community-based living has become widespread, in response to policies and models of care that emphasise the right of all individuals to a 'normal' life and an acceptable degree of self-determination. Intrinsic to a 'normal life' are social, work and leisure roles that provide sources of self-esteem, choice, stimulation and support. Much more is entailed than a narrow set of self-care activities and skills. There is mixed evidence about whether changes in living arrangements out of institutional settings into smaller community homes have really improved access to meaningful occupations for people with learning disabilities. Howard and Spencer (1997) found a wider range of recreational activities available in small group homes compared with institutional settings. However, Messent, Carlton and Long (1999) found that provision of physically active leisure was of low priority, with residents most commonly engaged in passive pursuits such as watching television, particularly in the evenings and at weekends. Although many residents expressed interest in the sample exercise programme provided by the researchers, barriers to ongoing participation included lack of staff for one-to-one assistance, lack of finances to pay for community facilities and classes, and poor transport.

Cavet (1995) collected detailed information from twenty eight services across Europe about leisure provision for profoundly and multiply disabled adults and children. Many categories of activity were examined including artistic activities. Music making, listening to music, painting, watching television and films, dancing, photograph albums, drama, puppetry and story-telling were included in this category. The findings did not examine the extent of participation in

specific activities such as the arts, but instead focused on the problems that services generally encountered in leisure provision, such as the lack of availability of staff and poor staff morale. Other commonly noted problems related to poor environmental design and the difficulties of identifying individuals' personal leisure interests.

This study examines access to creative leisure activities. 'Creative' is a term that is difficult to define but it tends to be applied to processes which incorporate active participation in sensing, intuiting and problem-solving and devising something that is novel and unpredicted at the outset. Creative activities provide people with many opportunities for learning, choice, self-development and enjoyment. Many people with learning disabilities enjoy active participation in art, music, drama, dance and the construction of stories and poems (Atkinson & Williams 1990; Gilroy & Lee 1995; Payne 1993; Simons 1995). In addition, 'passive' creative experiences – for example, watching a play or visiting an art exhibition – may also enrich life. There is less pressure to be 'correct' during creative activity, compared with work and domestic tasks, and so participants may feel an enhanced sense of personal freedom (Samdahl 1992). This is particularly precious for adults with learning disabilities as their lives are often marked by intensive education and training which can leave the person feeling perpetually to be a 'learner' (Brechin & Swain 1989). Their dominant experience may be compliance with others' goals and agendas rather than expressing individual needs and views. Creative occupations in contrast provide a vehicle for expressing a personal 'voice'.

Recreational creative activities may help to heighten sensory awareness, stimulate thinking and encourage growth of social and motor skills and self-esteem. Perhaps most importantly, all arts activities facilitate communication, particularly about emotions. Musical improvisation, art work, dramatic role play and dance make use of nonverbal channels of expression, and so may

help to convey personal perspectives even where the client does not have effective use of speech. Creative products provide a visible record of achievement, building self-esteem. Creative experiences also strengthen self-awareness and self-esteem in other ways - for example, through the group taking on responsibility for the running of the activity (James 1996a; Steiner 1992).

Despite the value of creative occupations to quality of life, people with learning disabilities encounter barriers to accessing adult education and community arts centres. These barriers include social attitudes, transport, and costs (Russell 1995). Some group homes in the community also have practices that discourage residents from accessing community resources (Sinson 1992). Even creative arts groups designed specifically for people with disabilities may exclude those with cognitive difficulties.

This survey sought to establish the current availability of creative leisure occupations to people with learning disabilities living in community homes in two large cities. Information was also sought about the typical venues in which this form of leisure took place. Managers of a randomly selected group of homes in London and Leeds were sent questionnaires. They were asked to indicate how often (if at all) a variety of specified creative activities were available to residents who expressed interest in participating, the usual venues of such activities, and common barriers to participation.

Method:

A postal survey was carried out of managers of community homes in London and Leeds, randomly selected from the IHSM Health & Social Services YearBook (1998). A variety of publicly funded and voluntary sector homes were included. London was selected because local

to the researcher and therefore convenient for carrying out further more detailed enquiry.

Leeds was selected at random as a comparison city. The survey focused on city-based rather than rurally situated homes as it was considered that a greater variety of venues might be available to residents.

The manager was invited to consider the general availability of leisure opportunities rather than reporting on individual residents, through the opening statement:

*'Although it is recognised that individuals each have personal needs, abilities and interests, the study is concerned with the **availability** of leisure activities to residents that have learning disabilities. Please give the answer that best summarises the usual experiences of the residents.'*

The questionnaire provided a checklist of creative occupations, with the following options:

art (including pottery and painting), dance/movement, drama/acting, needlecrafts, music-making (playing/singing) and music (listening). Although Cavet (1995) had included television watching and constructing photograph albums in her 'artistic' category, these were excluded as considered to be almost universal and not necessarily 'creative' activities. Needlecrafts were included as aesthetic wall-hangings and other objects can be created, and not simply utility products. Respondents were invited to name further leisure pursuits that they regarded as 'creative'.

Managers were requested to indicate whether each form of activity was available to residents on a daily/weekly/ monthly/ less than monthly basis, or not at all. The checklist was repeated to invite information about the usual venues for these activities (at home/ day centre/ adult education centre or further education college/ community leisure centre or group/ other). Based on previous research findings, a further checklist of barriers to participation in creative activities was offered and additional barriers were invited from respondents.

The questionnaire was piloted on four occupational therapy students with considerable prior experience of working in community homes for people with learning disabilities, and slight modifications were made until the questionnaire was clear.

Results:

Response rate: In London, 16/38 homes replied (42% response rate). In Leeds, 18/25 homes replied (72% response rate). A total of 34 homes were surveyed (54% response rate).

No. Residents: The number of residents reported as living in the community homes that the managers had responsibility for varied greatly – from 4-32. The median number of residents was eleven.

Availability of creative leisure: The managers described few occupations as available on a daily basis, so the daily and weekly figures have been combined in Table 1. The figures refer to the number of homes in which residents have at least weekly access to each occupation, if they so choose, also given in terms of percentage of the total sample. The venues in which such occupations can be enjoyed will be considered later.

Place Table 1 here.....

These figures suggest that listening to music was available to nearly all. Drama activities were least available to residents, according to the respondents. With the exception of drama, the majority of residents appeared to have access (if interested) to the other named creative pursuits on a weekly basis. Figures from London and Leeds were broadly comparable. Further activities identified as 'creative' by small numbers of respondents included gardening/horticulture, woodwork, and cookery.

Accessibility was also examined through identifying the activities that were described as not available at all (not even on an occasional basis). The figures refer to the number of homes in which there was no apparent access to the specified activity.

Place Table 2 here.....

This table shows that drama was completely unavailable in about one third of homes. Residents in about a quarter of the homes surveyed could not take part in dance/movement or needlecraft activities. It was not possible for the residents of about 20% homes to participate actively in music. Art activities were totally unavailable to the residents of 12% homes. Whilst drama may be considered to require quite specialist props and teaching, the remaining activities depend upon simpler, more available materials and staff support. In a minority of homes (about 20%), residents did not have access to any arts activities except listening to music.

Whilst the figures above perhaps indicate a reasonable availability of creative leisure occupations to people with learning disabilities living in the community, managers' reports about the usual venues for such activities confirm some ongoing problems in accessing 'mainstream' community facilities. Figures from the two cities have been combined in Table 3. Most respondents indicated more than one typical venue for some activities, so row % totals exceed 100%. Figures refer to the percentage of respondents naming each type of venue for the specified activities.

Place Table 3 here.....

Perhaps a survey of the general population would confirm the importance of the home itself for hosting many activities. However, these figures show that people with learning disabilities continue to rely on day centres and specialist courses within adult education/ further education colleges for creative leisure occupations. Access to 'mainstream' community leisure resources (leisure centres, drama groups, choirs and so on) was only available to the minority of residents with learning disabilities. So what barriers were perceived by managers as limiting residents' access to creative leisure pursuits within specialist or mainstream settings?

Place Table 4 here.....

The majority of managers viewed residents' personal lack of interest as a major barrier to accessing creative leisure pursuits. However, in addition, all respondents identified at least one social or environmental barrier. Difficulties in paying for the activity as well as the requisite support (in staff and transport) dominated managers' concerns. Nearly a third commented on unwelcoming community facilities and attitudes.

Discussion

Almost all community homes provided opportunities for listening to music. The managers participating in this study mostly reported at least one active creative occupation to be available for residents on a regular (weekly-daily) basis. Of the creative leisure pursuits surveyed, residents were most likely to have active involvement in art (such as painting, pottery, collage, sculpture). Drama and dance/movement were least accessible. This raises concern, given the literature on the psychosocial rewards and enjoyment that can be experienced from such activities (Chesner 1995, James 1996a, 1996b; MacDonald 1992). Even participation in music,

for example, through singing, was not always possible for residents, despite the minimal costs involved.

The survey confirmed previous studies in that residents often appeared to access creative leisure pursuits in specialist venues for people with learning disabilities, such as day centres/ adult training centres and adult/further education courses dedicated to this specific group. This again raises some concern, given that doubts have been expressed about the quality of provision in some day centres (Whittaker & McIntosh 2000). With the exception of art classes, it was relatively uncommon for mainstream community groups and facilities to be used for creative leisure activities. The survey indicated that residents in many homes seemed to have access to an acceptable range and frequency of arts-based pursuits, yet some problems with social exclusion clearly remained.

Managers' perceptions of the barriers to creative occupations mirrored findings from previous research into leisure provision such as that of Messent et al (1999) and Cavet (1995). Despite the professed value of community living, it appears that people with learning disabilities continue to receive inadequate financial support, preventing their exercise of choice in leisure activity. Transport costs and/or unavailability, and a lack of staff for one-to-one support were commonly seen as limiting leisure choices. Residents' individual interests often could not be accommodated if staff were not available or could not be paid for. Respondents often regarded the residents themselves as lacking interest in creative activities. This may mirror leisure preferences in the wider population, and is not necessarily problematic. However, staff have been noted to have difficulties in interpreting the interests of people with learning difficulties (Cavet 1995), and further enquiry is recommended.

Clearly the survey has limitations and should be regarded as exploratory. The sample was relatively small, although more substantial than could be included in a qualitative interview study. Participation in the study was voluntary and there may be some suspicion that only managers more satisfied with their level of provision and support for creative activities would answer the questionnaire. Although respondents' motivations for answering the questionnaire cannot be gauged, it remains possible that the results may present an excessively favourable portrayal of the activities available to residents. Managers may not necessarily know about all the community facilities used by residents, and may have concentrated on financial and organisational barriers because of their role position. Despite these limitations, the results from the two cities are broadly comparable, and concur with some previous findings. Ongoing problems in community access and financial/staff support were found, in line with previous studies.

In conclusion, this exploratory survey found that art (including painting, and pottery) was the most commonly available form of creative leisure occupation, and drama the least available. Creative occupations tended to occur in specialist settings such as day centres and a minority of residents participated in mainstream community groups and environments. Managers perceived the major barrier to creative leisure participation to be expense (for the activity itself and the support staff). Further barriers included insufficient staff to accommodate individual's personal interests, transport problems, and unwelcoming community resources/attitudes. Given its dependency on return of questionnaires, the survey may have provided a benign view of creative leisure provision. Even so, the barriers that were identified confirm that adults with learning difficulties encounter some profound and continuing problems with accessing community/ mainstream facilities. The survey has not included the views of people with learning disabilities. Their preferences and beliefs about the

value of creative occupations warrant further study, as most published discussions of these issues have been presented by creative arts therapists rather than recreational practitioners or disabled people themselves (eg Chesner 1995; James 1996b). Further enquiry is recommended into the barriers that are experienced by people with learning disabilities who would like to include creative leisure activities within their lives.

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RESULTS TABLES:**Table 1: No. (and total %) of managers reporting selected creative occupations as available to residents on a daily/weekly basis:**

	London	Leeds	% Total
Music (listening)	15	18	97
Art	13	14	79
Music (Play/sing)	11	13	71
Dance	10	13	68
Needlecrafts	12	8	59
Drama	7	9	47

Table 2: No. managers who reported selected creative occupations as unavailable to residents

	London homes	Leeds homes	%Total
Music (listening)	0	0	0%
Art	2	2	12%
Music (Play/sing)	2	4	18%
Dance	4	5	26%
Needlecrafts	3	6	26%
Drama	4	8	35%

Table 3: Usual venues for creative occupations identified by respondents: % total sample

	At home	Adult/Further Education*	Day Centre	Community
Music (listening)	94	6	41	29
Art	35	62	29	21
Music (Playing)	50	6	53	35
Dance	21	35	26	35
Needlecrafts	56	24	26	12
Drama	9	35	21	21

*Some courses were designed for people with special needs.

Table 4: Perceived barriers to creative leisure occupations reported by respondents in London & Leeds (and % total sample)

	London	Leeds	%Total
Expense – lack of funding	7	13	59%
Lack of/ difficulties with transport	6	9	44%
Difficulties in providing facilities at home	3	3	18%
Limited availability of specialist arts/crafts staff	7	5	35%
Limited availability of staff for one-to-one support	6	6	35%
Unwelcoming community resources/attitudes	7	3	29%
Physical/sensory impairments	5	5	29%
Lack of interest by residents	11	10	62%