

# Creativity and self-expression *in SEND*

The role of creativity in learning is essential, and yet often under-explored. TCES Group's Paul Morris talks us through how art is woven into the fabric of every day school life, and what this means for his pupils.

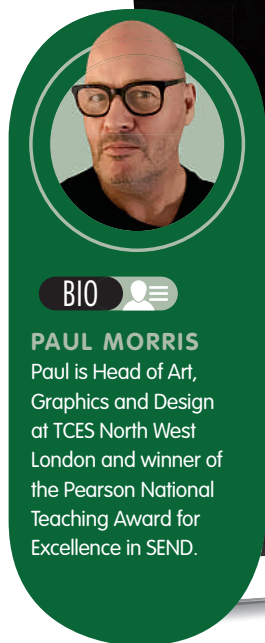
In 2014 I returned to teaching after working in the creative industries, determined to offer marginalised young people new opportunities to become art lovers and artists. I'm clearly not alone in believing how important this is. Last year's Durham Commission Report (<https://bit.ly/39rWXfp>) shone a spotlight on this.

"The Commission believes that it is short-sighted and morally wrong not to take advantage of the diversity of perspectives, experiences and cultures that exist across England," they said.

At TCES North West London, creative arts is central to what we do. Our pupils, aged 7 to 19, have an Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs and, in many cases, both. On joining TCES,

these pupils have experienced an average of three permanent exclusions and may have been out of full-time education for up to 18 months.

TCES does not exclude, either on a permanent or fixed term basis. Qualitative interviews with our alumni, conducted by researchers from Goldsmiths University of London (<https://bit.ly/33vL30d>) found that, with the threat of exclusion removed, students felt able to engage in new ways.



BIO

**PAUL MORRIS**

Paul is Head of Art, Graphics and Design at TCES North West London and winner of the Pearson National Teaching Award for Excellence in SEND.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Every pupil who joins TCES is entitled to our five-part curriculum of academic, enrichment, engagement, therapeutic and ASC/SEMH-specific activities. In addition, our creative arts specialism provides a wide range of timetabled activities.

Rarely will a child enter our school knowing they want to take an art qualification. Their self-esteem is often such that they don't consider themselves to have strengths in art, even though they may already be producing incredible pieces.

One of my A grade GCSE students presented as mute when he joined us and wanted little interaction with anyone else, to the point of being violent to deter them. The TCES refusal to exclude meant that despite pushing against us, he eventually

grew from the security of knowing that the adults were not going to give up.

His keen area of interest was animation. With our support, he went on to gain A\* qualifications and now has his own well-subscribed YouTube channel.

**IMPACT**

Our 2017 Ofsted report for TCES North West London, in which we were graded Outstanding, stated: "Teaching includes especially effective practice in art and science. Pupils learning had been precisely planned for, the classroom environment was calm, and pupils, including the most able, were being appropriately challenged."







My students don't get a 100% pass rate because I invite competition or comparison, they pass because I teach students that all work has value. It's then down to their effort, and hitting the marks set by the examination board that determines their grade.

One student joined TCES North West London with very low self-esteem, high anxiety and a propensity to create very dark, yet beautifully executed sketches. Through her personalised curriculum, she was supported to see her art as her strength (her super-power as we call it) rather than simply an angry release for her emotions. She went on to create a fascinating portfolio of work and achieved a Grade 9 in her art GCSE. She is currently working towards her art A Level. Before joining TCES, the student and her family were demoralised from battling to get the right provision and had all but given up hope that she could achieve within a school setting.

She says, "The art room is a place where I can relax and enjoy doing my work." Another student, now in his second year of A Levels says bluntly, "If not for the art room and art I would have left school."

I hope that the therapeutic and examination successes we have achieved at TCES provides a clear message; when educators invest in a rich, personalised creative arts curriculum that all students can access, they can offer life-changing possibilities for children with SEND.

## PRACTICAL POINTERS

**ENVIRONMENT** – make the classroom a place that children want to be. Consider the sensory environment and make use of colour and lights. I like to use a diffuser containing lemongrass oil and I also have snacks and water available. Break up the space so a child can find a spot either in an area suitable for conversation with others or in a backwater to work on their own. My aim is to give pupils a feeling of success by just being able to come into the room, find a space and a task that is comfortable.

**EQUIPMENT** – help children to build a strength-based perception of themselves as artists by investing in professional grade equipment for them to work with. For some students that will mean traditional brushes and paints, for another of my students it meant investment in animation software. In that instance we then asked the student to use his newfound knowledge to lead animation sessions for others within the school, enabling him to build leadership skills in the process.

**EXPECTATIONS** – I greet every pupil as they come in, but I am not offended by a scowl or a grunt coming back to me. Leave the individual alone to find their own equilibrium. They are not being rude but rather they are making a transition. I display clear, simple rules; no touching each other's artwork, no throwing things in the art room. I expect pupils to behave in a civilised manner, to consider others and I don't accept bullying, either physical or verbal. Crossing these boundaries will mean children are asked to leave the art room to reflect. Targets and work schedules are communicated via visual displays.

**EXTRA-CURRICULAR OPPORTUNITIES** – providing creative arts students with opportunities to showcase their work helps build their self-identity as artists. During lockdown we offered all children the opportunity to enter a piece for our virtual arts exhibition, covering performing arts, photography and digital art, amongst other categories. All pieces were reviewed by a stellar line-up of judges convened by our TCES Patron Esther Rantzen.

**EXAMPLE** – lead by it! I was recently awarded a Pearson National Teaching Award for Excellence in SEND for my work in creative arts. It was of course a great honour but, more importantly, it demonstrated to my pupils that I'm challenging myself to be the most effective teacher I can be. Days after this Award, TCES North West London became one of just a handful of special schools to be awarded the Platinum Arts Mark, an application that was completed with the help of a former student, who is now back in my classroom acting as a mentor to other students and building arts administration skills in the process.

