

MANY CONNECTIONS

Inter-generational arts at Sutton House.

There is something very simple about a group of older people teaching a group of children a song from their own youth. Simple, but also full of significance. When the adults from the Hackney Caribbean Elderly organisation met the children from De Beauvoir school, and taught them songs from their childhood in the Caribbean they were also passing on stories, a way of life, a particular spirit. The children shared with them a Caribbean heritage, but had grown up in London. Songs which celebrated meeting under the banyan tree, squeezing fruit in the market, and dancing outside on a hot evening were a vivid conduit to the elder's youth, and a connection for the children to references that they recognised, but often did not know first hand. In teaching and learning a song the group were forging relationships, recounting stories, sharing heritage and illuminating aspects of their identity.

'Many connections' was devised in response to the 2004 'History of black Londoners' work at Sutton House. This National Trust property is the oldest domestic residence in the East End of London. It holds a unique and important position within the social and historical heritage of Hackney. Community learning is key to the work of Sutton House, providing opportunities for participatory and creative activities, designed in partnership with and for local people. There is an emphasis on reaching new and non-traditional users.

In 2004 members of the Hackney Caribbean Elderly organisation shared their reminiscences through an interactive exhibition entitled 'Coming to England'; a discovery trail explored influential black Londoners; and local school children were invited to interview the elders about their experiences.

'Many Connections' responded to the positive feedback to this work by forming a new partnership with a local school through their Ethnic Minority Achievement Co-ordinator and employing an intergenerational specialist and a consultant. This team, led by Sutton House, worked with the HCEO Co-ordinator to devise a project that would, over eight sessions, bring together children of Caribbean heritage with Caribbean elders. The sessions,

preceded by scene setting workshops with both groups, were held at Sutton House and drew upon the Coming to England exhibition and the History of black Londoners trail. Drama, art, storytelling and music were used to explore the themes that emerged, both from the content introduced to the group, and from the relationships growing between elders and children. The work that they did came together in a celebratory sharing event, where friends and family were invited to enjoy a performance followed by a Caribbean meal.

In inter-generational work there is an interchange, and an exchange. As the relationships between participants grow. Storyteller Surya Turner, who led the sessions, encouraged a mutual appreciation, so that both groups learned about one another.

Working in Sutton House meant that neither group was the host, they were both on an equal footing. Sutton House was our host, and I think it made both groups feel valued that we were being hosted by a beautiful place of significance.

Surya Turner

Before looking at the many skills and talent of Mary Seacole, the group had a look at their own skills and talents, creating portraits of themselves which celebrated their own attributes. This encouraged them to affirm one another, but also laid the ground for an examination of an important historical figure. And so we can see an interesting process. The individuals begin to relate to one another, and learn about themselves in the process. We see them moving on from this to study a key historical figure, and use what they have learned about each other, (because there were people in the room who had been nurses, who knew how to make medicines from herbs, or who knew about Florence Nightingale), to help illuminate her story. Because Mary Seacole is featured in the Black History Trail, the group then saw her in a wider context, and saw her honoured by Sutton House, which they knew to be a place that in some way holds history. Within just one session all these different aspects were reflected, and there was tremendous excitement at what the group were achieving.

I was no good at school, my head was too full of thoughts. So now, this is where I do my learning.

Caribbean elder

When the group came to look at the portrait of Dido Elizabeth Bell there was a similar process. Having had their own photos taken for their portraits, they were aware that how someone is presented can be very significant. I visited the session at which the group, with no prior knowledge of the painting, dissected the image, noticing that she looked important but also like a servant, noticing the confidence with which she looked out at them. When they came to hear her story, they were amazed at how close they had got, not just to the facts, but to some of the feelings that might have been present for a young woman of mixed English and Caribbean heritage being brought up in a wealthy English family. Their own personal experiences, all that they were discovering about each other, helped them to examine a person from ‘long ago and far away’, and bring her very close to themselves.

The children also had opportunities to hear, and to re-enact stories from their older partner’s lives. I had previously met some of the elders when I evaluated Sutton House’s programme of work with elders, in 2004. Then, they spoke about the importance to them of sharing their stories with the younger generation of children of Caribbean heritage.

*“When we first came to this country we were so busy trying to cope we never thought about what we had left.
Now we have time and it all comes back.”*

Caribbean elder

On this programme of work the group had worked with storyteller, Sandra Agard, who reflected very positively on the gathering and recording of these stories, from a group who are a significant part of Hackney’s population

“Yet another strand was being added to the House’s long history by the inclusion of the Caribbean Elders.”

Sandra Agard

As the project progressed, and stories were shared, the bonds within the group grew stronger. While all the participants thoroughly enjoyed the content and the style of the sessions, it was clear that the main attraction was one another.

When I see the children it lifts my heart so much, I'm speechless.

Elder

They were so nice, so kind

I will always remember George's smile.

Children

This was not what is sometimes imagined as the result of an easy natural bond between generations, but the result of careful and sensitive work on behalf of the facilitator, supported by the rest of the team. Many of the children found it extremely difficult to focus for any length of time, and each session began and ended with a time of quiet and reflection. The consistent courtesy and affection of the elders had quite an impact on the children, and the elders blossomed under the curious and friendly attention of their young friends.

The focus on the fostering of relationships within the group built their capacity to look outwards, to connect with their own heritage, and with the aspects of history reflected in Sutton House itself. Sutton House has built an ongoing partnership with a significant group within its local community, and made them feel welcome. Their relationship with heritage becomes a dynamic one, in which they learn and teach, discovering about all that is on offer, but also able to leave their own mark, and know that their voices have been heard.

Since the oldest member in the group was 90, we travelled a lot of years on a regular basis. So travelling a few more by introducing a character from the Victorian era who came from the same place as some of the participants felt an easy step to take. For the elders to learn about characters who made the same trip from the Caribbean to England several hundred years previously was significant. Most would not have learned this in their school education.

For both groups there was a sense at the end of acknowledging that many have gone before us and paved the way for our experiences in England now.

Surya Turner

As the National Trust learning vision states, ‘Through their engagement with the National Trust people will acquire a sense of discovery and the enthusiasm for sharing it. This will embrace the emotional and spiritual side of lives while also stimulating intellectual development. Within the Trust, and in our work with others, we will value learning for its own sake as well as the equality of opportunity it brings.’¹

Sue Mayo
March 15th 2006

¹ National Trust 2002