

08 *Inspiration Africa!* Using Tangible and Intangible Heritage to Promote Social Inclusion Amongst Young People with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

How can we make meaningful connections between diverse museum audiences, tangible artifacts and the intangible historico-cultural traditions from which they sprang? Does the anthropology collection have a productive role in the UK government agenda on social inclusion for children with disabilities? What is the value of employing new theoretical perspectives and partnerships at the frontiers between the museum and the school? This paper explores these questions and the deeper issues surrounding them through *Inspiration Africa!* a project to benefit learning-disabled children, involving the Horniman Museum and twelve schools in South East London.

Introduction: aims and structure

In the socio-cultural landscape of the twenty-first century the museum has power. The museum has the power of sanctuary, shrine, place of knowledge, forum and a vital role in democracy. This paper will focus on the power of the anthropology museum, the tangible and intangible collections, as a forum for democratic exchange to promote social inclusion and community cohesion amongst young people with disabilities. The museum, as it will show, has the potential to function as a zone where learning is created, new identities are forged and new connections are made between disparate groups and their own histories. In some cases, tangible and intangible collections will be shown to have a new and more positive power - to help disadvantaged groups of young people with disabilities to raise their self-esteem.

This paper is divided into two main sections. First, there is a definition of key terminology and a description of the theoretical underpinnings of the *Inspiration Africa!* project on which this paper is based. This was a two-year, £72,000 project funded by the Department for Education and Employment. It involved twelve schools and the *African Worlds* gallery of the Horniman Museum in South East London, an area of rich cultural diversity but one suffering from extreme levels of economic deprivation. In the second part of the paper the creative work of the young people from two of the twelve schools is used to illustrate the value of constructivism in informing museum/school partnerships. Finally there are some concluding remarks and recommendations for future project work at other locations.

Terminology

a) Intangible heritage and tangible heritage

In October 2003, at its 32nd General Conference, UNESCO produced a working definition of intangible cultural heritage, which highlighted:

... the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and it provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO, 2003: 4) [my underlinings for emphasis]

I emphasise three main points from this definition. Firstly, the importance of tangible objects *as well as* the practices associated with their production and use. An idea, which seems to mark a *both and* feminist approach, as distinct from the *either or* of dualist thought (Golding 2000). Secondly, the notion of *constantly recreating* is vital, as creativity and creating something new is central to this paper. The paper does not speak of the sterile processes involved in any simple reproduction of cultural objects and echoes Fanon's warning against the desire of colonized societies to preserve *mummified fragments* of culture (Fanon 1993: 41). Finally, it is argued that embedding both tangible and intangible aspects in a complex peopled domain strengthens an individual and community *identity*, while

pointing to a wider shared humanity, which promotes *respect for cultural diversity* or intercultural understanding at a global level.

My thesis here also leans on Giovanni Pinna's paper for ICOM News (Pinna 2004). Pinna notes the *indefinite boundaries between* - expressive objects, the language and the oral tradition from which they emerge, as well as the symbolic and metaphorical meanings attached to objects that derive from their histories and the interpretations to which the museum contributes through the exhibition process prompting the visitor's individual interpretation. Pinna's comments helpfully raise the perspective of the museum visitor and their personal 'meaning-making' alongside curatorial intentions. While the visitors' initial interpretations, according to constructivism, are based on prior knowledge, personal background and the socio-cultural group they belong to, Pinna reminds us that the museums' strategies of display and operational practices are also inevitably influenced by wider socio-philosophical factors. (Hein 1999; Macdonald 1996). Since the 1970s, motivated in part by the post-colonial demands of previously subjugated people, museums in the West seem to be moving from their traditional position as temples of cultural authority to a more dynamic forum of exchange and debate. In this new location museums are increasingly engaged in self-reflexivity and raising *questions about knowledge and power, about identity and difference, and about permanence and transience* (Macdonald 1996: 1-2).

In the light of Macdonald's questions this paper will explore a creative zone between tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Specifically, it will examine the personal responses of learning-disabled pupils to a new framing of knowledge on African objects from the Horniman's *African Worlds* exhibition.

b) Special educational needs: medical and social models

Four of the twelve schools involved in the *Inspiration Africa!* project were exclusively for pupils with learning disabilities and two of the mainstream secondary schools were located in Educational Action Zones (EAZs) where almost one third of the pupils had learning disabilities. *Inspiration Africa!* pupils had a range of learning disabilities and throughout the project's team leaders worked in *effective partnership* to facilitate activities disabled pupils might *do with support*, rather than focus on *what they can't do* (Valuing People 2004: 14). As team leaders we developed educational programmes for disabled pupils that were characterised by high expectations for all. We recognised that pupils with disabilities may take longer to learn new skills and grasp complex information but were determined to give them as much choice and control over their project work as possible.

The Horniman partnership worked with the social model of disability, which points to the social construction of disability and false ideas of normality within the creation of capitalism (Barnes 2002). The social model highlights social barriers and environmental issues, and

locates problems and prejudices within the minds of able-bodied people, individually or collectively (Oliver 1996). This model is distinct from the medical or individual model, which is influenced by biological determinism and focuses on medically orientated control, 'care and cure' agendas (Oliver 1996).

Employing an appropriate model and terminology was regarded as crucial to the success of the project. Since language work was central to many project activities, disabling labels were interrogated and terms such as 'handicap' were avoided as denoting passivity. The language activities were enjoyed by the pupils who simply wanted to be included in ordinary activities and not always seen as 'special' (Valuing People 2001: 11).

In the UK 1 in 4 families have a disabled member and 8.7 million disabled people, or 15% of the population, are covered by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). The DDA was passed in 1995 to enshrine the rights of disabled people to social inclusion and highlight the responsibilities of employers as service providers. By October 2004 the DDA requires *reasonable access* to buildings, and institutions such as museums will need to ensure their policies, procedures and practices enable



Figure 1: Benin bronze plaque from Nigeria: African Worlds Exhibition,

access for all members of society. Throughout the ten years that I worked at the Horniman – from 1992 – the museum offered a range of auxiliary aids and services for disabled visitors, including ramps, loops and Braille labels. They were therefore reasonably well prepared to address the new Labour government agenda based on *social inclusion, civil rights, choice and independence* (Valuing People 2001: 14).

c) Social inclusion, social exclusion and community cohesion

In 1997 the Social Exclusion Unit established by the 'New' Labour government defined social exclusion in holistic terms. The term 'Social Exclusion' was intended to replace the concept of 'poverty' to encompass holistically *what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown* (www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/ (17, September 2003). At the time of writing this paper, the latest government report Tackling Social Exclusion importantly returns the discussion to the earlier emphasis on the economic basis of social exclusion, as passed through families from one low income generation to the next and effects certain high risk groups, including people from 'ethnic minorities' and people with 'disabilities', which the *Inspiration Africa!* project targeted (www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/tackling, 10, October 2004: 4)

While *Inspiration Africa!* cannot claim to have alleviated the wider problems of economic deprivation the participants certainly developed a range of skills, which is one key factor highlighted by the government documents. The Horniman Museum also became the sort of location that David Fleming helpfully attached to the government definition of social inclusion in the museum context, *one that inspires and uplifts people, that confronts them with ideas, that helps them understand a little more about themselves and their surroundings* (Fleming 2002: 224).

I further argue that *Inspiration Africa!* enabled the Horniman to utilise cultural objects, *things of quality*, to progress social cohesion (Smith 1998: 37). Social cohesion, according to Chris Smith, the Labour Minister for Culture's recommendation, is dependent upon two factors. Firstly making available ... *cultural experience and activity ... to the many not just the few* (ibid). Secondly, linking these cultural experiences to an understanding that certain aspects, which determine identity

construction, are shared in common across cultural divides. As Smith noted -

... developing our own individual sense of identity through cultural experience, and touching a sense of shared identity through shared cultural emotion, must be achievable by everyone, no matter what their circumstances or class background or location may be. (Smith 1998: 37) [my emphasis]

Smith later contends that it is exclusion from *a sense of shared identity* that weakens communal bonds and leads to a fragmentation of society. During *Inspiration Africa!* the Horniman was able to illustrate British society as a *community of communities* through creatively connecting its African cultural artifacts and the intangible oral traditions with the lived experience of UK pupils (Parekh Report 2000: 3). *Inspiration Africa!* was a proactive project that emphasised the responsibility and role of the museum as agency on the Government's inclusion and cohesion agenda.

d) Learning-disabled pupils access the National Curriculum

In reaching out to excluded audiences and developing innovative ways of encouraging intercultural understanding, it was crucial to work within the access guidelines of the National Curriculum for England. The guidelines state three principles that are essential to developing an inclusive curriculum. These are *Setting suitable learning challenges, responding to pupils' diverse learning needs and overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of pupils*. Adhering imaginatively to these guidelines enabled the key aim of the National Curriculum, to *provide opportunities for all children to learn and to achieve a high degree of success*, by offering *varied teaching approaches that build on diverse interests and experiences, matching challenges of work to the pupils' skills* and ensuring a degree of *success* (National Curriculum 2000).

Inspiration Africa! project work aimed to promote four key skills. Firstly, *communication: speaking and listening, reading and writing a range texts*. Secondly, *working with others, contributing to discussion, valuing different perspectives, cooperating and meeting challenges together*. Thirdly, *creative thinking, extending ideas and using imagination*. Finally, *evaluation, valuing, have confidence in judgments*. The project work outlined in the

next section will clarify the relationship of communication in the English curriculum to the museum context.

Stories, histories and a Benin plaque

The *Inspiration Africa!* team-leaders at Marjorie McClure School (Special Educational Needs) included Sola Oyelele (writer/storyteller), Tony Minion (artist), Jacqui Callis (ICT specialist), and myself (museum educator). I had deliberately selected a multi-racial team, who all felt a strong resonance or personal affinity with the museum objects as well as a determination to employ them as part of an educational agenda to challenge racism in contemporary multi-cultural Britain. The composition of my team follows research findings which demonstrate that if the curriculum and the people who deliver it positively reflect multi-racial society, this has a positive effect even on the most disaffected audiences - who are too often African-Caribbean boys (Golding 2000).

Marjorie McClure School is situated in the London Borough of Bromley and the school population is predominantly white working class. Research shows there is an even more urgent need for anti-racist, multi-cultural education in areas such as this, where media stereotypes and misunderstandings persist partly because diverse communities never actually meet. Working in partnership, we selected a Benin plaque from Nigeria as the key object for creative work with Marjorie McClure pupils in Year 7, who are aged between 11 and 12 years old, and the word 'Stories' was chosen as their key theme.

Throughout the *African Worlds* exhibition at the Horniman, and on a website link, there is an excellent text accompanying the objects and providing valuable new research information. This was written by the 4-person Anthropology Advisory Panel (AAP). The AAP comprised African, Caribbean and UK scholars - Emanuel Arinze, Joseph Eboime, Catherine Chan and Anthony Shelton. In their Benin text the AAP highlight positive features of the socio-cultural background in which the object was made. For example Benin is described as a *powerful and sophisticated West African Kingdom, founded in the 11th century by the Edo people, which commanded great respect from the early Portuguese visitors in the late 15th and early 16th centuries*. The text also traces the purchase of the plaque to events *in the late 19th century when British soldiers destroyed its capital and looted the city of its rich art*

traditions which, tragically and ironically, first alerted Europe to the level and range of achievement of Benin artists. This text, written for a reading age of 16+ years was not immediately accessible to our pupils with learning disabilities and so the Inspiration Africa! team leaders developed achievable language activities to build on the pupils *diverse interests and experiences* (National Curriculum 2000).

At Marjorie McClure *Inspiration Africa!* team leaders introduced the project on day one through the concept of naming. At the outset, just under the header, the museum text explains the plaque was made by an, *unknown craftsman*, but later in the third paragraph of the text panel a Chief is mentioned by name, Uwangué. Using this information the pupils began to learn about the importance of naming for all cultural groups, including the Edo speaking people of Benin City in Nigeria who made the plaques. They were able to draw similarities between the histories of the UK and Nigeria, which record the most powerful people and the events of their lives. Then Sola spoke about her recent visit to Benin City where the oral tradition of storytelling with musical performance is still strong and she led a name game where name sounds were invented.

Sola started the game by using her own name 'Sola' and asked the group to imagine wind whistling through the trees calling her name, shhhhhoooooolllllaaaa. Everyone enjoyed practicing 'wind talk' around Sola's name and soon felt confident to try experimenting with their own names, which included Chris - the sound of someone biting an apple, Sarah - ssssnake, Thomas - steam train and Viv - vruuuuuu vacuuuum cleaner! This initial work established a fun framework for the project and set all the participants at their ease, since enjoyment and feeling comfortable are vital factors necessary to promote learning (Hein 1999).

Next the group mind-mapped the name of the project *Inspiration Africa!* and decided inspiration means excitement or being interested in something. Then individuals and small groups of pupils played musical instruments, part of the *African Worlds* gallery 'hands on' collection, which always arouses 'minds on' interest (Hein 1999).

'Minds on' activities with museum objects are designed to extend quality looking and promote critical thinking about the contextual information attached to the object and the wider socio-political world of past and present times from which the object emerged. For all

pupils, including those with learning disabilities, understanding of the past is never complete but always partial and never instantaneous but takes time. During *Inspiration Africa!* work at Marjorie McClure the team-leaders developed creative tasks that would enable pupils to extend the period of looking and thinking, and ways of connecting their increasing understanding of objects originating from the ancient Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, with their everyday life experiences in London, UK. Creative writing consistently proved a fruitful means of achieving this.

For example, working from musical instruments Sola encouraged the pupils to think of words that expressed music and they wrote acrostic poems. To write an acrostic poem, a word is written lengthways down a page and each letter is used to start the first line of the poem. This simple structure is a helpful way of working on language activities with all pupils in the museum context and is especially productive with learning disabled groups. The pupils wrote a joint acrostic poem on the whiteboard before writing their own poems. They used their names to describe favourite things in their own lives, to begin making personal present day connections with objects, which aids understanding of the past. Two examples of Majorie McClure's 'name' and 'things I like' poems illustrate this work.

Charli likes football
Harry Potter is my favourite book
Arsenal is my team
Riding my bike is fun
Lots of toys are great to play with
I like my friends in G3B and G3A

Nigel
Is twelve, he
Goes to school, he
Eats fish and chips and ketchup at
Lunchtime

In the afternoon of day one the pupils used the school's excellent internet facilities to look at their 'key object,' the Benin plaque, which they would be seeing at the museum on day two of the project. According to the museum text the plaque shows Chief Uwangué wearing ceremonial dress of coral headdress and necklace, pea bell anklets and highly decorated skirt. At this time the pupils also explored a modern museum plaque made

especially for the handling collection, which represented Oba Ohen with similar ceremonial dress and mudfish legs. Mudfish are commonly used to denote the supreme power of the Oba over the land as well as over the watery sea realms of the God Olokun. This plaque enabled everyone to feel the textures of the sculpture and was vital in allowing one blind pupil to access the curriculum (Picton 1995: 399). Discussion of the mythical story prompted the pupils' own imaginative writing.

The museum object and the text prompted the team leaders to provide original African garments, specially purchased from Markets in Brixton London, Lagos, Nigeria and Kumasi Ghana, which permitted the pupils to literally 'try on' aspects of another culture. Whilst the children were dressed up Sola gave them parts and told the story of *How music came to the world*. This story, from the Yoruba people of Nigeria, is about a talented young man who was the drummer for his village and whose family name is prefixed by Ayan, which Sola explained meant he came from a drumming family. The story ended with the whole class playing music together again.

After break Year 7 looked at the materials and technologies of Benin plaque production, using the complicated 'lost-wax' process which the pupils saw illustrated in a video. The children drew the musical instruments and representations of the sounds that they made. They waved their hands to form the shapes made by the instruments before drawing them. Then Tony demonstrated the screen-printing process and the pupils worked from their drawings, simplifying, enlarging, cutting out shapes and placing them on to fabric to create their own banner. Raffia and wool were also used to create patterns that represented the sounds made by the instruments. The screens were placed over the images and the pupils painted freely through the screen. The banner was printed twice with the first print using cold colours and the second print using warm colour, work which offered an opportunity to discuss the colour of the metal that the Benin plaques are made from - a warm 'red', the colour of life-blood, that the Edo people specially prize. This dialogue was prompted again by part of the museum text on the plaque material, *reserved for royalty ... enduring and permanent*, and its red and shiny qualities were believed to be *protective of the king and the kingdom*. At the end of the session the class posed in front of their banner.



Figure 2: Children's art: Mrs Doubtfire (Watercolour)
 Figure 3: Children's art: Mrs Doubtfire (Drawing)

When Jaqui documented this day she asked the class to suggest some captions for the photographic record that the team leaders were in the habit of making, since images of individuals and groups with the handling objects often prompt memories and further creative activity. The pupils made some lively comments that Jaqui recorded on tape. The following are taken as illustrating the variety of feelings.

In this picture I am playing the drum - it is called a talking drum. On my head I am wearing a brightly coloured hat. Sola put the cloth on my head. It felt BAD! playing the drum.

It sounds like music boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Nice. Noise. The stick moves bam! The strings moving boonder! boonder! boonder! la, la, la, la, la, la. I WAS EXCITED, LOOK AT ME!!!!

I like the African hat from the Horniman museum. In this picture I look pretty and I'm enjoying myself. I think I will enjoy the project.

My friend dressed up as a Queen and wore some very colourful clothes. Then we played the instruments after, I played the shaker.

Tony is holding the screen-printing. We printed a shaker - blue, red, orange, yellow. I like Tony - because I JUST DO.

There was a strong sense of irritation in this last remark, which shows a pupil, at the end of a long tiring

day, exasperated by the effort of extended dialogue and the work of evaluation demanded by the National Curriculum. This provided a salutary lesson for team leaders, who reminded themselves that, just as museum text can be too long and prevent successful communication, so can museum activities!

On day two of the project the school visited the Horniman Museum and the pupils talked about the 'stories' on the Benin plaques as illustrations of important events from the history of the Benin people. 'Stories' was their key word and Sola talked about where you can find them. She also asked about their favourite stories and things to draw and write about, reinforcing the work on favourite things they had started on the introduction day. Taking every opportunity to reinforce learning has proved especially important for pupils with learning disabilities, and the desire to repeat the pleasurable experiences triggered by the object handling made this a simple task.

At the museum Sola told two stories from memories of her family life in Nigeria, called *Pepper Soup* and *The Bike Ride*, which led the class to discuss where stories can come from - Africa, around the world, Bromley, home, brain or imagination and memories; where you can find stories - in books, comics, magazines, from parents, grandparents and other family members, artists and teachers; favourite stories - Cinderella, Goldilocks, Pokemon, Matilda, the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe; favourite things - buildings, pets, cats, dogs, dalmation, beagle and people. At the end of the session the pupils were asked to bring in a funny story from home to work on in the project.

These stories were developed throughout the week

and read out at the beginning of day four. Some were written and some recorded onto audio tape. The stories were later illustrated and transferred onto screens to be printed and also scanned into computers to be worked on digitally. Two stories are provided below as representative of this work.

Mrs. Doubtfire

One day it was my brother's anniversary and my nan had some curlers in her hair and I said 'I got a nickname for you nan, Mrs. Doubtfire!' My brother had a camera and he sneaked round the door and he took a picture of her and her face dropped down to the flooooooerrrrrrr....

The Flower

About four years ago I was a bridesmaid for Mrs. Cox. I had to wear a nice dress that was cream and light green. I also wore cream shoes. I got dressed and ready at my home, and then I went to Mrs. Cox's home to meet her and the other bridesmaid.

I had really long shiny curly hair, they put a big fresh flower in my hair. When we were all ready we got into the very posh car and drove to the church. On our way there Mrs. Cox had to keep placing my flower back into my hair, because it kept slipping down as my hair was so shiny. In the end as it did not want to stay in my hair, Mrs. Cox tucked it into my waistband.

On day four of the project Sola also did a 'too big for' frame poem. A frame poem provides a structure for pupils to complete their ideas, in this case 'I'm too big for ...' First Sola asked: 'What are we too big for?' The class

answered – we are too big for chocolate, too big for sitting on the potty, too big for sucking dummies. Then the team leaders pointed out that we are never too big for museums, just to amuse the group, and everyone made up a line for Sola. Finally Sola talked about language and how we say things like 'you know what I mean' at the end of sentences. From this Sola made up a poem song/game and all of the class did a round.

Person 1 says 'I'm too big for sucking my thumb.'

Person 2 says 'I'm too big for Bob the Builder.'

Person 3 says 'I'm too big for lower school.'

Then, all together, they say:

'You know yeah, you know yeah,

I'm too big for that yeah.

I'm too big for that you know, I'm too big for that yeah.'

All the pupils involved in *Inspiration Africa!* had the opportunity to evaluate each day of their project work through interviews or specially designed forms provided on the internet. Some work sheet forms gave pupils the opportunity to choose a photograph, write a caption for it and send it to our Cloth of Gold website. The following comments describe their favourite parts of the project and things they would like to have been different.

The screen-printing was good and the writing was good. It was hard writing the poem because I had to do something personal and I only tell people that I trust.

My favourite part was doing the drawings and screen-printing with Tony. I have really enjoyed this project, I wish it didn't have to end but mum says all good things come to an end.



Figure 4: Children's art: The Flower (Drawing)



Figure 5: Children's art: The Flower (Watercolour)

This pupil's family, along with the families of her classmates in Year 7, became regular visitors to the Horniman, despite living at a considerable distance away in Bromley. It could therefore be argued that while one project ended for one school group, the positive project experiences were a motivating factor in cultural inclusion for their wider family groups.

Conclusion

In this paper I have aimed to make a strong case for the museum to facilitate the use of tangible museum objects and intangible oral tradition as triggers to creative dialogue for pupils with learning disabilities, who are among the most socially excluded groups in the UK (Valuing People 2001). This 'both/and' approach to the curriculum was viewed as an appropriate learning pathway for everyone, regardless of age or ability levels, to access culture and promote inter-cultural understanding, although the paper demonstrated that object-centred discussions were particularly motivating for pupils who were under-achieving academically or in danger of becoming disaffected' since it offered a high degree of academic success.

Success was achieved during *Inspiration Africa!* through the social experience of opening pupils' minds to critical thinking based on an idea of learning that included close multi-sensory work with African objects and discussing ideas alongside feelings to interrogate what is considered 'fact' about Africa in the contemporary museum and the media, and, most importantly, making creative connections between the communities the objects emerged from and the daily lives of the pupils. Overall *Inspiration Africa!* work at the museum and school frontiers provided a symbolic forum space to affirm positive new identities for individuals, as well as a notion that aspects of cultural identity and values are shared in common amongst people of the world.

In practical terms, other museum sites concerned with extending socially excluded pupils' communication

skills and literacy levels, are recommended to use the key word, acrostic poem and sentence frame techniques outlined in this paper. These simple, low cost and effective techniques have been developed in a creative partnership, which opened the museum to a range of alternative voices and positively affected cultural inclusion in South London. Other museums at other locations are advised to engage in museum/school partnerships, to develop other ideas and to disseminate them via their museum websites, their local universities or the professional journals. We all benefit by pooling good resources.

Finally, this short paper was only able to outline some main points but further information can be found in three sources. Firstly the independent qualitative evaluation, which confirmed the success of the project work in terms of raising the students self esteem and achievement (Clarke et al 2001). Secondly at the website <http://www.clothofgold.org.uk/archive> where a wealth of images and details of all 12 projects can be found. Thirdly, I would be very pleased to share ideas and enthusiasms by email at vmg4@le.ac.uk, since I believe the museums of the world have a role in increasing democracy and progressing social equality amongst global citizens. Let the pupil's comment 'all good things come to an end' actually mark a series of fertile new beginnings.

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