

## Summer research project into reggae dancehall culture a perfect example of positive youth activity

09 January 2007 Deborah Gabriel

### Positive youth activities must be practical and interesting enough to engage young people

Yesterday local authorities became legally obliged to ensure that they provide positive activities for young people. A summer project last year based on reggae dancehall culture is a perfect example of what young kids can do.

The new requirement which came into force yesterday under section 6 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 means that local authorities have to provide 'positive activities' for young people in their area such as youth clubs, sports facilities, arts projects and cultural events which can be educational or recreational.

As the announcement was made yesterday the Young People's Minister, Beverly Hughes admitted that a **"significant minority"** of the nation's young people do not participate in any positive activities. The new law is aimed at increasing the skills and confidence of young people to: **"Enhance their life chances and avoid the possibility of falling under negative influences."**

A summer research project which took place last year which was developed by education, development and learning organisation **Nubeyond**, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, is a perfect example of a project that crosses the boundaries of education, art and culture.

As part of the project, called: **The History of Reggae Dancehall Culture: The Hidden Voice of the Black Experience**, over a four week period 10 black youngsters aged between 12 and 17 carried out extensive research and were trained in website technology and film making. At the end of their project they produced their own website, a CD rom and a groundbreaking documentary which features many respected reggae artists and dancehall deejays such as Maxi Priest, Papa Levi, Tippa Irie and Macca B.

Speaking to Black Britain about the project, Dr Lez Henry, Director of Nubeyond, historian and former dancehall deejay, said that there were three key things that he wanted to come out of the project: **"First of all we wanted to get some young people to do some research into something that they probably thought didn't relate to them, like the history of the seventies and eighties and looking at it through the genre of reggae music and sound system culture."**

The project was very much about bridging the generation gap and showing the young people that they had a lot more in common with their elders than they thought: **"The most important thing is that we wanted to give the young people a platform where they can use their own voices to tell a particular story from their perspective."** Dr Henry believes that it was also important to give the youngsters experience within a university environment to give them confidence that higher education is a real possibility for them:

**"We thought it was important that they received not only the university experience, but so they could be introduced to research methods and interviewing techniques."** The youngsters were taught by a professional filmmaker how to make a documentary and a company was also brought in to teach them how to create a website.

Dr Henry welcomed the new law and said that it is crucial that people realise that youth provision is not just seen as a way of controlling young people and getting them off the streets: **"The reason why we did it, is because it's not just a matter of having the resources there – there are loads**

**of pupil referral units where young people go in and sit down and twiddle their thumbs all day.”**

It is also important to tailor projects to the skill levels of the young people as those who find learning challenging need more developmentally-focused activities, whereas those who are high achievers need to be challenged and extended: **“It’s not enough just to provide a building, you’ve got to provide something practical that the young people can engage with and feel like they own it, as ownership is important.”**

### **Summer Research Project was a positive achievement for the young participants**

Dr Henry said that the summer project was evidence of how technologically sophisticated young people are, as they were able to develop new skills over a relatively short time period such as using a professional video camera. His advice on working with young people is: **“Meet them with what you bring to the table, give them a chance to present their ideas and then you give them some guidance.”**

Giving the young people ownership of the project was very important and Dr Henry said that those involved feel the project belongs to them to the point that they feel proud of it and defend it: **“They are pleased with their work, they are proud of their work and we witnessed a transformation of those young people over the period of four weeks.”**

Some of the youngsters started out by saying they would never go in front of a camera and eventually did and others were initially reticent about speaking in public. But at the launch of the project in October last year when a conference was held, many of the youngsters spoke about it in front of an audience of around 150 people: **“A lot of them now realise how important it is to be able to tell your own story in an intelligent way as a young person,”** he said.

The kids initially thought that working with older people would be ‘boring’ but they soon changed their opinion when they got to meet established artists like Maxi Priest, Macca B, Tippa Irie and Linton Kwesi Johnson.: **“When they spoke to Macca B, they were so in awe of him because of how clever and intelligent he is but also because of how accessible he is. They weren’t used to that and I think it was fantastic for us and it was fantastic for them,”** Dr Henry said.

Traditionally youth provision has just been an extension of schooling – kids are told what they need to know, what they need to learn and how to learn it: **“We don’t do that, we say here’s an idea, are you interested?”** Although Nubeyond’s project took place over a four week period during the summer holidays, Dr Henry said that there are other options available. Nubeyond is currently in negotiations with the borough of Lewisham to gain space where similar projects can be run throughout the whole year.

The new law is being backed by government funding of £4.5 million in 2006/7 and 2007/8 to assist local authorities in both developing and publicising youth activities. This is in addition to the £115 million Youth Opportunity and Capital Funds, which is to provide funding for youth-led activities and to provide places for young people to go within their community.

Concluding the discussion about Nubeyond’s summer research project, Dr Henry said: **“We know the enthusiasm is there, we know the young people are interested and we know that a lot of black youth do not want to be seen as uneducable, ignorant or dumb. They just want to be appreciated for what they are. Those of us who have the skills need to be able to impart them to them in a way that isn’t patronising or condescending but a way that uplifts and empowers them.”**

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