‘Learning disability’ and ‘Sport’

Helen Graham, Research Associate at the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies, Newcastle University, discusses how sport was a key part of her project on the history of Day Centres for people with learning disabilities in Croydon, and featured prominently in the resulting exhibition at the local museum.

When we talked about what should go into the exhibition, most people agreed ‘Sport’ should go in. For some people, it was memories of winning medals that stuck out, for others it was the places they visited; the bagpipes being played in a trip to Aberdeen for a meet or the Hull halls of residence they stayed in. So in the In Our Own Words: Stories of Croydon’s Day Centres exhibition at the Museum of Croydon (May-September 2008), featured ‘sport’ as a major theme. We included Ida Adeniyi’s memories of what it was like to run in a race, a photograph of Brian Jones doing the high jump, Jackie Hurrell’s bowling blazer and a photo of her bowling team.

Now, I should note at this point that personally I do not share this affinity with sport. And frankly, it doesn’t take much reflection to work out why. I’m sure I’m not alone in saying that I don’t like sport because I was/am very, very bad at it. You know, bad in the sense of humiliating-failure-to-high-jump-in-front-of-the-whole-school and last-finishing-in-the-cross-country. It also doesn’t take a big analytical leap to say that I didn’t like sport precisely because it was a site of visible differentiation, which cast me, quite literally, as a loser.

Probably because I’m not alone in all this, ‘Sport’ has been located within a certain web of associations in social history and museum contexts. Something that is important for some groups of people but a turn off for others; something which is linked precisely to winners, the fit, the healthy and the able. I mention this because on one level ‘Sport’ is not an obvious focus for engaging people with learning disabilities as a group. Yet at the same time sport, because of its status in our social and cultural lives, is a completely obvious and easy way of being positive about people with learning disabilities’ successes. This isn’t a contradiction, both these things are true precisely because sport create winners (and losers).

It became notable as we developed the exhibition that the issues raised by represented people with learning disabilities’ experience of sport in museums mirrored the status of sport in day centre life. Day Centres – initially known as Adult Training Centres – were set up following a government rethink of services for those then defined as ‘mentally handicapped’. The idea of the service was that people would learn key tasks such as how to work, cook, clean and take care of personal hygiene. In their initial conception they were segregated spaces which would enable people to make a transition to ‘normal life’. However, in reality
progression through the day services system was largely ineffective and at this point the Training Centres effectively became day centres – places where people spent their days.

Sport fitted in this ‘day centre’ context in a number of ways. Firstly, sport operated through a learning disability’ network across the country and, indeed, the world. So Croydon used to go every two years to the England-wide mini Olympics in Hull. Ida Adeniyi was England Captain for athletics and, with her team, travelled to Ireland and Spain. Yet, in its broadest sense ‘sport’ also operated within the day centre as a defined activity for many different people. This included ballroom dancing, Tai Chi, and chair exercises and in this context worked more as ‘healthy living’ and ‘leisure’. It was notable that ‘sport’ was easier to display in the *In Our Own Words* exhibition than ‘leisure’. Sport was easy to memorialise because sport memorialises itself. It is demarcated via material signifiers – blazers, flags, medals and trophies – and it was filmed, photographed and documented in scrap books, like Mandy Pearson’s, because it was a special activity. Special in the sense that you went to different places and met different people; special also in the sense that by going you were chosen. At this core level, sport – rather than recreational Tai Chi – was easy to make into heritage because its successes are expected to have material longevity.

The day centres whose history we were exploring have been recently closed because of a policy ethos which now emphasises independence and choice and especially being part of the community. In this context segregated activities have become a matter for concern. Yet sport remains generally distinct from this. This is significant not only because it might point to the limits of inclusion but also because it also qualifies the notion that sport operates primarily as a practice which is *just* healthy and fun. The Special Olympics operates what they call ‘divisioning’: ‘Competitions are structured so that athletes compete with other athletes of similar ability in equitable Divisions’ (Special Olympics Great Britain online). This is done so ‘athletes of all ability levels are encouraged to participate, and every athlete is recognized for his or her performance’. Divisioning might be considered as a way of simply making sport more fun but it must also be noted that divisioning is done to essentially foster healthy competition where rough equality is organised in order to ultimately (after the race) enable a legitimate (delimited) hierarchy of ability.

To conclude, kept material culture and intense memories are more likely to be made from notable activities, activities that were special in some way. History belongs to winners in this way too. The broader point, however, is that there are no pure sites through which ‘hidden histories’ can simply be celebrated. Sport is rather a site where social processes, with their inconsistent inequities, are worked out and given specific forms. Forms which live on both in medals and blazers still proudly owned by some and in the lack of kept material cultural for other ‘less special’ day centre activities. That all said, one of the items found as part of the project was a video of a day long athletics meet at Croydon arena. Along with the winning and
not winning, the medals and the flowers, the unedited video also caught the beginnings of a few people dancing to a steel band. As the music went on, more and more people were drawn in until a conga developed which joyously snaked in and out of the camera’s fixed frame. Sport is success and failure and differentiation and demarcation but, as even I’m forced to admit, that’s not the whole story.

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References: