

Care in the community

Children who would benefit from greater empathy are flourishing in a new intergeneration project, explains **Ben Levinson**

In 2014, Kensington Primary was in a difficult position. It was in the bottom 20% of schools for progress and there was a concerning set of views among some that meant girls were sidelined and certain cultures and beliefs were promoted over others. We set about completely overhauling the school – a significant part of which was about changing attitudes.

Fast forward to a hot day in May 2016. Much of what was rotten had been stripped away. Kensington was now in the top 5% of schools for progress, and nearly 1,000 children, parents and staff were gathered in the school playground to celebrate the Queen's birthday.

While we knew that attitudes had changed significantly – evident in the transformed confidence of our girls – there was still a need to further engage with the outside world. Little did I know that a chance conversation (while dressed as the Queen!) would prove the catalyst for the next stage in our development.

Andrew Richardson, head of the Manor Park community team, was a guest that day and we discussed the idea of an intergenerational project. Andrew used his connections in the community and got a few local elderly people interested. At school, we identified children

who would benefit from developing greater empathy and seeing the world from a new perspective.

In June we welcomed our first group of elderly people to the school. It had taken significant persuasion from Andrew and his team to get them along. Many lacked confidence, one had experienced a recent bereavement, others just felt it, 'wasn't for them'. The first few minutes were tentative – the children were keen to interact but found they couldn't be heard or understood, and weren't sure how to deal with this. Our visitors were equally uncertain. After some time, I was called away. I left Eddie and his wife – a couple who'd lived across the road from the school for over 50 years – with a couple of Y5 children.

I returned shortly after, apprehensive of what I would find. I needn't have been. A dozen Kensington children were engrossed in conversation with our visitors. Some were describing the changes they had seen in the area. At another table, the children were discussing their recent topic on WWII. Eddie and his wife had brought a book all about the area and were showing the children century-old photos of the school and Manor Park – the children couldn't believe the changes, or the horse-drawn carts!

Since then, the Kensington Cares project has flourished. The group has grown and relationships have developed. The elderly people have visited us for lunch and there is a 'skill sharing' afternoon planned, where they are going to teach the children Indian dance moves.

There is no doubt it has transformed the thinking of both groups. Asha Chaudhri, 72, said, "I like the children. They are always polite and even speak to me in the street now". Grace Smith, 82 said, "I feel like I have new friends nearby. I live on my own so this has helped me to meet new people". Aysha in Y6 says, "I talked to Sheila about maths. I don't always find maths very exciting but after listening to Sheila, I have been inspired and now have a greater enthusiasm. After meeting with the older people I feel good about myself."

Kensington Cares has

expanded beyond this project. The school choir has visited a local housing project to sing for people in sheltered accommodation, and has also sung for the Chelsea pensioners. We have also started working with RAMP, a local charity that provides support to refugees.

All of this is about developing our children's empathy and providing them with the skills they need to make a difference and be truly global citizens. With everything that is going on in the world at the moment, it is more important than ever that we equip our young people with this broader world view. One of the things we are most proud of as a school is the regular feedback we get from visitors telling us how polite, caring, positive and confident our children are. Kensington Cares is at the heart of this and something we will develop even further over the next few years.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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