

## Reaching out to the 'hard to hear'

The purpose of this document is to set out a strategy for change. A successful learning community must be clear about its way forward. Here we suggest radical steps to achieving higher equity among stakeholders in order to change the future for young people, closing the gap between those who achieve and those who we continue to fail.

1. What can we do differently to meet the needs of individuals who currently achieve least?
2. What is our guiding star? How does it influence our ethos, goals and practice?
3. Who can we involve in change? How do we capitalise on the resources that already exist within our communities?
4. How do we change present culture to accommodate those who do not currently participate?
5. How do we grow and support relationships with individuals from marginalised groups?

### ***Preparing new histories***

If learning organisations are to lead on designing more equitable communities, then the individuals within them must share a clear vision. Both individually and collectively we must implement radical and profound change at the heart of current systems. If young people inherit our present system then we will have failed to realise our legacy. Therefore it is vital to find both consensus and clarity in the vision to which we aspire, for it will impact directly on what our communities become.

It is imperative that we join together across communities, creating an intentional framework that supports achievable and sustainable social change. It is not only our duty to create a path and manage the implementation; we also need our skills, practices and beliefs to sustain the relationships that will facilitate this fundamental change. Ticking boxes is not enough: **each of us** needs to be different – in our attitudes, priorities and behaviour.

The reality shaped by our vision is impossible to predict. The changes we start today will affect the landscapes of our communities in years to come in ways we cannot yet envisage. So we need to be

mindful **now** that our behaviours affect the hearts and minds of the young people around us and carry consequences for **our** future communities.

The path to understanding such issues is a personal one. However, the creation of an inclusive environment is a political matter, as it requires stakeholders to engage in change while supported by management, structures and systems. The challenge is to find a process that engages everyone. If community members can espouse shared values, we no longer rely solely on a charismatic leader. Gone is the need to ‘sell’ the future direction to the community, since individuals create it themselves. And the vision is no longer unrealistic as it can be firmly grounded in the collective experiences of past and current achievement.

### **Think!**

- **Your behaviour reveals your beliefs: take time to figure out your guiding values.**
- **What can you do differently to live by the values you hold? Consider how you could put each value into practice.**
- **Do your homework. How much have you thought about these issues? What does ‘equality’ mean to you?**
- **What is your own vision for the future? How can you best support this future?**
- **“When my life is done I will have left a trail of positive and good actions on earth.”**

Tony Buzan (2001) *The Power of Spiritual Intelligence*, HarperCollins.

### ***Agreed understandings***

**Meaningful and lasting community change always originates from within, and local residents in a community are the best experts on how to activate that change.**

***Inclusion is an ongoing process of adjusting to diversity; it liberates and engages all individuals by creating a culture that fosters belonging and participation.***

The process of inclusion connects the underpinning philosophies of equality and diversity, and aims to improve the practice of supportive relationships within communities. It is a process that shares

power amongst all stakeholders, and builds on existing good practice by improving mainstream policies and practice.

Working together is defined by interaction between individuals and groups to achieve common goals, resolve conflict and create community cohesion. It involves belonging to a wider community with shared values and responsibilities. In co-operative groups, people come together to explore issues of concern and interest. All members of the group contribute to the ideas that go into their joint work and are part of the activity as a whole. Everyone has a say in deciding what questions are addressed and what ideas may be of help; everyone contributes to thinking about how to explore the issues; everyone gets involved in the activity and finally, everybody has a say in whatever conclusions the group may reach.

It is essential that all group members seek consensus and actively develop a shared understanding of what the whole group needs in order to participate. A shared process does not happen if one or two people dominate the group or if some voices are ignored altogether. It is also important to note that there may be people outside the group who are affected by its actions. While they might not be full members, they too should be approached in the spirit of cooperation and dialogue.

Managers in charge of process also require sound knowledge of content, and should be able to share this with individuals both within and beyond any organisation. To lead on inclusive practice is to celebrate relationships amongst people of all levels, skills and specialities and to foster respect among different groups and organisations. It is useful to consider community relationships as familial, rather than hierarchical. Whilst rank may still play a part, belonging is paramount and connection is vital to its development. The sharing of information underpins the sharing of power and ensures that all members keep abreast of new developments and outside influences as they strive towards their shared goals.

A shared process specifically calls for the recruitment and involvement of excluded and alienated individuals on their own terms. It is a way of getting closer to seeing those most vulnerable to exclusion as leaders and as stakeholders who share in catalysing change. In the past the Civil Rights movement emerged from marginalised groups who were angry at the inequalities of power within systems. Such groups were consulted (if at all) only at the final stages of change designed and

organised by expert professionals. At this stage only two options remained: to agree or disagree. They had no say on the goal, the process, the collaborative solutions or the allocation of resources. Self-perpetuation powers inequality.

In these circumstances individuals sometimes feel compelled to overpower each other as a way of overcoming their own feelings of hopelessness and anger at the injustice of the situation. The tragedy is that such power games divide and corrupt relationships on all sides. The strength gained by the unity of a shared voice is weakened to the point where it can become the very focus of the problem. In the worst case, perceived in-fighting further strengthens the case against the marginalised group as they are then seen as creators of their own problem.

Voices from different movements teach us different things, as have the individual visions of their leaders. We should never want to lose the richness and detail of individual ideals: they are crucial in motivating individuals and if properly fostered can catalyse rich and varied solutions. Such dreams can be used to build a vision that whole communities will want to achieve. The trick is to acknowledge differences at this stage and not rush the process by focusing on the similarities. This deliberate approach will enable communities to move away from an 'oppress the oppressor' mentality (a natural reaction to oppression) and towards a common vision.

### **Act!**

- **Talk to your team about their beliefs, values and behaviour.**
- **Invite individuals from other agencies and families to your meetings and open days.**
- **Find ways of including their thoughts in your organisation's dialogues; and invite *the community* to share your vision.**
- **Research your community. Which groups are you not reaching? Who, in your neighbourhood, does not even make it through the door? Find out why.**

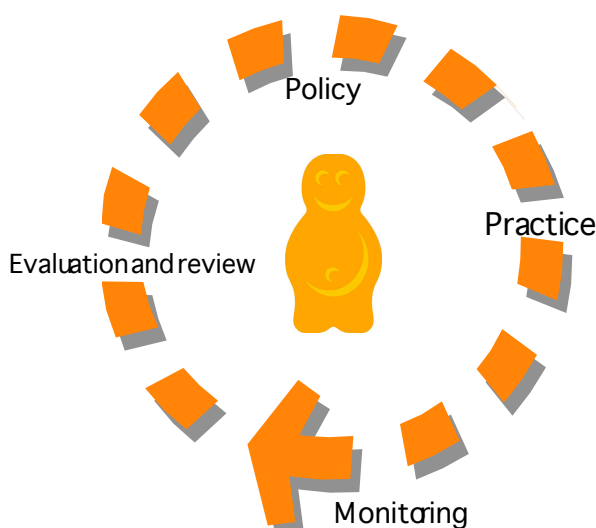
### ***Policy and practice: changing the rules***

Policy and practice are both highly dynamic – part of a moving process that incorporates both evaluation and review. In organisations where inclusion has become a central ethos, individuals have recognised the value of the journey rather than seeing the achievement as the only goal.

Complacency is the greatest threat to change in this instance: beware the completed checklist that closes the mind to development and progression!

In order to be fair, 'rules' must be decided by the community group and necessitate a dialogue with all stakeholders. It is only by reaching agreed ways of working together and laying them down as policy that we can begin to work effectively as a group. A formal process should allow individuals to express what they each require in order to participate. It also enables consensus with others. Some things might be straightforward and easy to agree on. Some may require flexibility and compromise. Still others may be singular but essential to a particular individual's participation. However, all requirements have equal weight and it is not until all needs are met that we can move on to lesser priorities. The point is that giving short measures on *needs* treats individuals unfairly: since their absence does not prevent participation, *wants* and *wishes* come later.

Although we cannot please all the people all of the time, we can go a lot further towards treating them fairly. To do so we must value the fact that we are not only diverse but complex beings. Satisfying people's needs demands flexibility of systems and action. It is only by acknowledging this at the beginning of the process that we have any chance of delivering anything with fairness. Equality does not come as a result of portion size, but from valuing each individual's particular needs.



**Develop!**

- **Policies that are developed by the whole community and in tune with group understandings.**
- **Are your policies reviewed on a regular basis by staff, children and families?**
- **Are new members made aware of ethos, policy and the need for their continuing evaluation and contribution to existing good practice?**

***Small steps towards humanity: active welcome***

An active welcome seems a logical starting point. Without marginalised groups represented in the room, we miss out on the voices we need to hear. We must challenge our understanding of ‘hard to reach’. Most marginalised individuals are only too keen to share their thoughts, but are rarely present at the debate. Reinforced by the social narrative and rarely supported by strong allies, these individuals have learned to expect rejection. So there is an urgent need for us all to understand that some individuals must be deliberately sought out, encouraged to participate and supported to belong.

The way we greet each other clearly indicates the forces at work in this context. We assess others within seconds of meeting, reaching conclusions about our relative merit. We peg ourselves in the hierarchy and act accordingly – subordinate or leader, giver or taker. These rapid, subconscious judgements are based on our lifetime’s experience and endorsed by subtle and deep rooted cultural narratives.

The crucial part of the process is to recruit, support and liberate individuals who can activate the process of change. We all know this type of person: they attract others, energise groups, initiate action and share information. Such individuals can take a vision and break it down into manageable steps that are then the responsibility of others within the community.

These strengths are also identified in John McKnight’s’ understanding of ‘community guides’. He cites an ability to hold the vision, to see a person's gifts and link them to the right job. He describes a manager with direct community connections who is not afraid to be heard; who promotes flexible, unrestrictive practices and policies and upholds values and procedures whilst entrusting stakeholders with the content and delivery. A good community guide creates safe environments in

which trust, relationships and empowerment can thrive. People are not told what they should do but their involvement is supported, their strengths acknowledged and their effort praised. Public praise demonstrates to others that individuals are valued and respected.

### **Liberate!**

- **How can you increase ‘the welcome’ in your organisation?**
- **Find out what people love most about your organisation so that you can build on good practice.**
- **How can you prepare for those less welcomed by our society – those we label as *different*?**
- **What conditions have to change so that marginalised groups can participate?**

### ***Stereotypes and prejudice***

**‘If you want to treat individuals equally, you must be prepared to treat them differently’.**

Our next challenge is to listen to the individual, starting with those among us who already experience discrimination.

- How does the perception of fairness differ across our communities and organisations?
- Have we learnt from past injustices?
- Have we really listened?
- Have we changed our attitudes and behaviours?
- Who writes the new rules?
- Who decides who is heard?
- How can we redistribute resources?

Establishing the balance of power fairly and safely should be a priority and benefits all parties. Our life histories, social culture and systems will influence the outcome of any meeting. If we fail either to acknowledge that we are influenced in these ways or to challenge our assumptions, then we may neglect some truly important issues. And meanwhile our complacency may lead us to assess clothes, accents and appearances and to make judgements corrupted by our own prejudices. This in turn will influence our thoughts, direct our actions, and hinder openness and acceptance in each new encounter.

We need to understand and distinguish clearly between *stereotyping* and *prejudice*. Whilst stereotypes are essential in our ability to process difference and enable a fine-slicing based on experience and instinct. We must challenge and re-evaluate our assumptions, holding them up to scrutiny at every opportunity. It is one thing to hold a set of ideas on a subject about which we know a great deal. It is quite another to make a rapid judgement about something or someone, based on a lifetime of negative media and biased information.

*“Our first impressions are generated by our experiences and our environment, which means that we can change our first impressions - we can alter the way we think - by changing the experiences that comprise those impressions. If you are a white person who would like to treat black people as equals in every way - who would like to have a set of associations with blacks that are as positive as those that you have with whites - it requires more than a simple commitment to equality. It requires that you change your life so that you are exposed to minorities on a regular basis and become comfortable with them and familiar with the best of their culture, so that when you want to meet, hire, date, or talk with a member of a minority, you aren't betrayed by your hesitation and discomfort. Taking rapid cognition seriously acknowledging the incredible power, for good and ill, that first impressions play in our lives – requires that we take active steps to manage and control those impressions.”*

*Malcolm Gladwell, (2005) Blink: The power of Thinking without Thinking. Penguin.*

There are still too many individuals who have been subjected to rigid, exclusive systems and negative attitudes and who fear the additional burden they might face when joining a new group. Both adults and children quickly pick up on even the subtlest signals given out by those around them. Attitudes translate into behaviour and will impact on an individual's feelings of empowerment and their expectations. To feel welcomed enables us to join in with a game, activity, routine, or the life of a community group.

All individuals have a right to be heard: their strength needs recognition, their expertise needs appreciation and their experience must be valued. If those in power are overly concerned with their own position, will they have the strength to really listen?



**Listen!**

- **Who do you find difficult to ‘hear’?**
- **Make sure every individual’s views and suggestions are seriously considered and properly respected.**
- **Are there acceptable ways of interrupting individuals? Of denying others their feelings?**
- **What causes us to listen to some individuals differently?**

***The role of allies***

Those who have been marginalised should not have to rely on the goodwill of others for equality. Such dependence reinforces stereotypes – powerless, needy, poor, weak victims. Furthermore, making support conditional on likeability would be even more ridiculous given the emotions (anger, hate, dejection, disaffection) engendered by the experience of exclusion. The ‘deserving’ tag also reinforces the social narrative that an individual is somehow responsible for their own ‘acceptability’. Listening to the different voices within a team or community is not always comfortable, but it is essential.

To become allies we need to accept that behaviour is led by emotion on both sides of the relationship. As discussed above, our own fears will lead to difficult communication which in turn alienates others. But most of all we need to be aware that the behaviours engendered by our society’s ongoing treatment of difference have led to the marginalisation of whole communities, with the same individuals experiencing repeated rejection. Those labelled with ‘Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties’ provide a clear example of a group at great risk of exclusion. These individuals tend to act in ways we find difficult to accept: violent, disruptive, obsessive, inarticulate, withdrawn etc. It might just be that some of these behaviours may be the result of feeling unaccepted and misunderstood. Their needs remain unmet within an ever more restrictive system that denies individuality and self-expression. If this is the case, how do we take responsibility? If we just do nothing, the system will continue to exclude those whose needs are most challenging. As agents of social change we must acknowledge the harm that continues, and do everything in our power to change the system.

Friendships develop naturally around interest, but since relationships are often precarious and conditional, they may not of themselves bring about change. Being part of a group often means hiding our own views, particularly in larger gatherings, for fear of being subjected to ridicule, a lack of acceptance or total exclusion. The marginalised individual often pays the cost of acceptance by tolerating the oppressive views of others.

Addressing injustice demands far more than tolerance. Tolerance is a passive state of acknowledgment of cultures and systems and does not belong in a relationship. Tolerance fails to understand difference and avoids engaging in interaction that may, for some, feel raw and uncomfortable to begin with. In the long-term, meaningful relationships unlock understanding that can fuel change. So tolerance is not the issue here. Rather, marginalised individuals and groups are entitled to an unconditional *acceptance* of their presence within our communities. More powerful individuals must move beyond tolerance to an active understanding and thus to unconditional acceptance. Whilst groups and individuals must be challenged over their discriminatory behaviour, they must not be blamed or shamed for who they are.

#### **Acknowledge!**

- **Address discrimination:** publicly challenge any behaviour that is intolerant and dismissive.
- **Involve marginalised individuals** in the identification of discrimination: work together to determine what you can do or say to stop unfair practice or the expression of negative ideas.
- **Accept movement leadership** by seeking out groups informing on specific forms of discrimination.

#### ***Building bridges, developing trust.***

In seeking to establish a sense of safety and belonging, we initially look for similarities in each other, seeking common experiences and interests in an effort to foster rapport. We also identify differences that trigger feelings of insecurity, lack of acceptance and fears of rejection. Because of these conflicting pressures, we often chase acceptance by stressing our strengths. Unfortunately,

in doing so we can be oppressive. We must therefore interrupt our own defence mechanisms in order to prevent our actions from hurting others.

We would be foolish to assume that it's easy to achieve a fairer society. If it was easy we would have cracked it, and we would all live in an equitable world.

- It is not.
- We have not.
- We do not.

Our goal must be the achievement of social justice, so redressing present injustice by creating fairer systems and supporting allied relationships is a priority. As social justice is a right to which we are all entitled, we all have a responsibility to make it happen for ourselves as well as for each other. To do this we each need to understand, first and foremost, what fairness means to ourselves as individuals. The role of the ally is to step forward and contradict powerful negative narratives, not on behalf of others, but as unacceptable to ourselves. The phrase here is not "I'm doing this for you" but "I cannot accept these thoughts /statements /jokes for myself. I am not prepared to tolerate \*ism in the world in which I live." The way we chose to live our lives will determine the change in our culture, and we can all effect change by taking individual responsibility for how marginalised groups are talked about. Because we quickly accept prejudices as common truths and thus shared culture, the common 'we' voice needs to be challenged if it supports prejudiced ideas. As individuals we should strongly contradict prejudice with positive statements and questions that counter the negative stereotypes fuelling oppression. A failure to challenge racist, ageist, classist, sexist, disablist statements keeps discrimination exclusion a living reality for those alienated by oppressive behaviour.

Also, how can we support and promote positive relationships in communities that have been fragmented and damaged by internalised oppression? We have historically grown accustomed to see the way forward as a solution designed by those 'in power' and implemented on behalf of those less fortunate. This paternalistic attitude is certainly doomed to failure. Power used in this way is condescending and abusive. Equality is not something we do for others – a benevolent act towards those perceived to be deprived or less able. It should be a reciprocal relationship involving choice.

Once broken, trust is hard to re-establish. Some tend to avoid new connections and commitment once trust is breached; others will see each new relationship as a fresh start. However, in all situations it is foolish to jump in without safety. There is strength in knowing our limits, keeping ourselves in the shallows and not going alone into the rapids: it ensures survival and longevity. We can be trusting whilst being cautious, but ultimately, a wish to reach the other side of the pool means we have to let go of the edge.

Working on placing our own trust in different individuals is a good way of gaining the trust of others as it calls on us to relinquish our power and learn. Understanding that oppression can also be passive requires personal strength since it requires our acknowledgement that we are in some way part of the problem. We all carry sets of beliefs by which we judge others, enabling us to feel superior, perpetuating stereotypes and prejudice and thereby fuelling injustice. To move on we must take responsibility and accountability for such issues.

Being strong enough to hear other people's story is vital. Those in power tend to focus on holding onto their position and few possess the strength to really listen. What prevents us from hearing that the world we live in is riddled with injustice? Too often, our impulse is to contradict or ridicule, denying the reality of situation and the feelings of those involved. We pat shoulders, arms and heads. "It'll all be okay." Don't worry." Thus we deny the painful reality of others.

The strength of true allies lies in their lack of 'need' to control: rather, they perceive a balance of power as a positive result. It is for them the benefit of fairness, not a charitable donation, a benevolent act. It is almost as if the gain is selfish; a need to benefit is the act of the relationship and the equality of others is perceived as a by-product. The real prize lies in the gifts that arise from shared and mutually beneficial relationships.

#### **Promote!**

- **Capacity** – ask your stakeholders to list their skills and what matters to them, so that they can find meaningful ways to contribute. Bringing individuals together to achieve this will also enable active information sharing and strengthen cross-group relationships.
- **Belonging** – organise shared activities that attract peoples' involvement in what matters to them - their passions, whatever they may be (football, festivals, food, volunteering, green

issues or community action for example). This introduces individuals from different groups and helps to form new relationships, strengthen old ones, and promote unity and collaboration.

### ***Individual leadership and ownership of action***

*“Empowerment, whilst an important step on the way to liberation, suggests a significant element of top-down process. If the leader can empower, so they can disempower. In creating a climate where people are liberated, the leader unleashes what is within people - once that genie is out of the bottle, there is no going back...”*

Ian Lawson, (2003), Fast Track: Leadership Spiro Press.

The way forward for the active organisation of personal change is threefold:

#### **1. A personal investment in research, development and time**

We must demonstrate a clear intent to seek direct and unbiased contact with others. Our behaviours (eg.the way we invite others to share our endeavours, the way we actively listen to their thinking and ideas or facilitate their participation) are evidence of our beliefs. As individuals we must be flexible and accommodating in our actions, demonstrating attitudes that will fuel goodwill and radical change. Our acceptance of the diversity of others should be apparent in gestures, language and environment. To do this we need to be both informed and proactive in seeking out the issues that affect marginalised groups by exploring books, leaflets, meetings, training, and websites; and push our own understanding on an ongoing basis.

#### **2. An investment in group development, shared activities and short-term goals.**

We must share skills and experience, supporting growth in individual team members and shared goals as a group. Being too ‘hands-off’ denies the planning, support, framework and encouragement needed to be successful as a community. When dealing with individuals from marginalised groups this investment is particularly vital to contradict feelings of worthlessness, anger and low expectations. As individuals in leadership positions we need to develop new strategies and skills.

### 3. Time

New ways of working are not always immediately successful. Whilst maintaining optimism about positive and possible outcomes, there is a need for all to learn and adjust – and maybe make a few mistakes – in the short term. In order to become meaningful, relationships must mature. Trust only comes with time, as we learn to work interdependently and share successes pleasure in our achievements and progress.

In the short term it may be necessary to redress the balance, dividing resources unevenly in favour of those who have long been unfairly treated. We will need to clarify our own understandings and feel comfortable with some groups getting more until the situation becomes one that is both fair and equitable. For those in power, working in partnership with marginalised individuals for the benefit of communities is a fundamental and vital challenge.

#### **Build!**

Here are some ideas to consider when working towards best practice (not all will be applicable to your organisation – be creative!).

#### **Procedures**

- Raise participation by rewarding good practice
- Liberate staff by giving them the responsibility for change.

#### **Attitudes**

- Recruit allies: build support groups of families/staff who wish to lead on community action
- Value each other overtly and publicly.

#### **Systems**

- Develop flexibility in games, rules, procedures and policies
- Enable personal development and professional reflection
- Create a common vision in group meetings – seek *consensus* not compromise.