ADVANCING THE JOURNEY TO INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING

Centre For Inclusive Futures
POLICY, ORGANISATION & COMMUNITY ACTION LEARNING

Notes on developing strategies for achieving school transformation from within.

Four key requirements:

➢ **Effective leadership**
➢ **An inspiring human rights-based vision**
➢ **A process for wide participation in continuous school improvement**
➢ **Sustained investment in developing inclusive practices**

Introduction

In his best-selling book, *Creative Schools,* the distinguished British educationalist, Sir Ken Robinson, invites us to consider afresh the fundamental question of 'What is education for? His own answer is that the aims of education are *to enable students to understand the world around them and the talents within them so that they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens.* Talents can of course take many forms and we should certainly recognise that in the 21st Century, citizenship has political, economic, social and environmental dimensions.
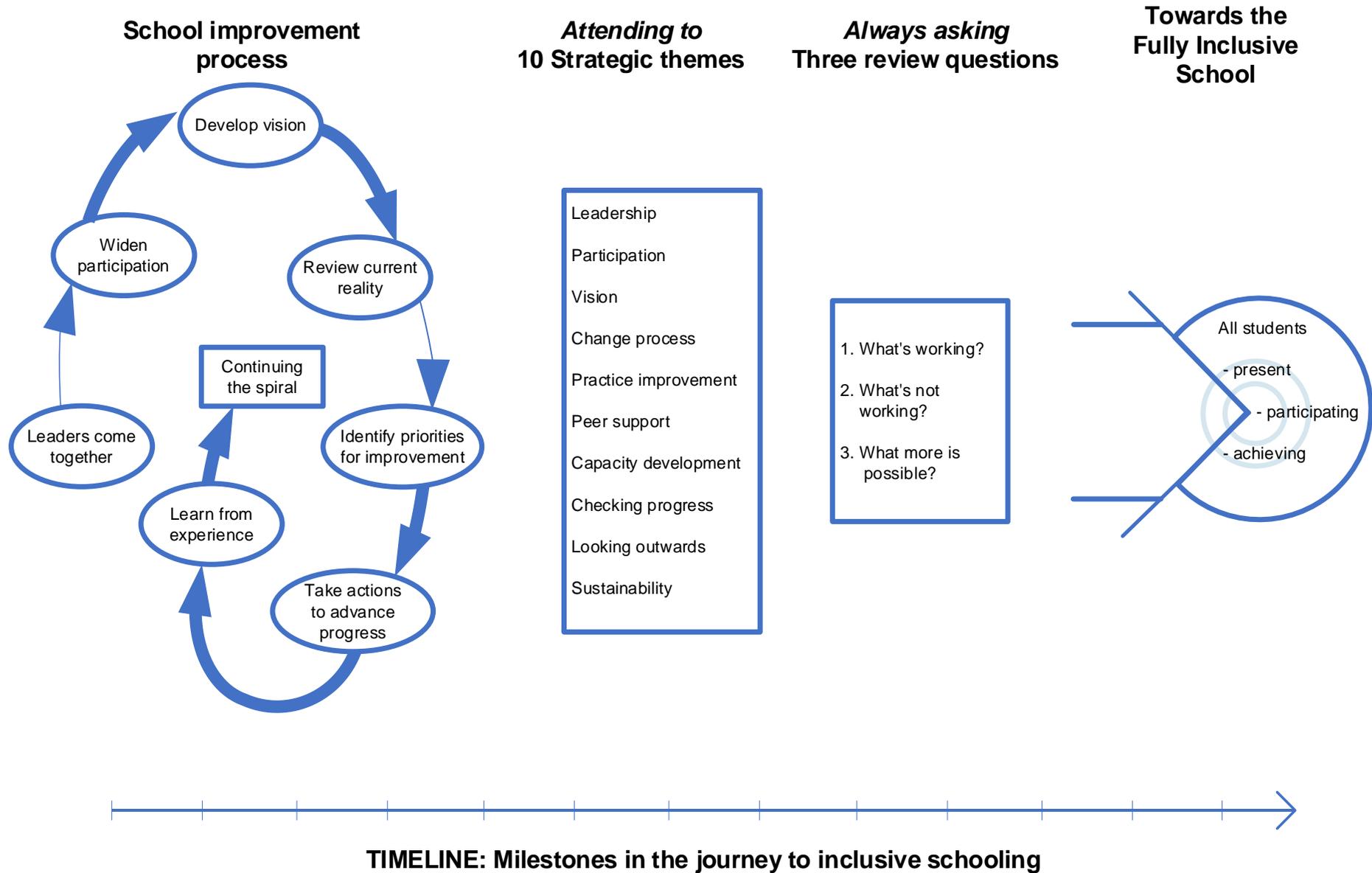
The thrust of the argument in *Creative Schools* is that much recent educational reform focused on academic learning, standards and testing is taking us in the wrong direction: instead these aims require that we promote a broad and flexible curriculum, creative and personalised approaches to learning and a culture which celebrates all kinds of diversity.

These three features of schooling are even more important if we are to be successful in what a UNESCO publication calls *Reaching Out To All Learners* and so fully including students from minorities at risk of disadvantage and discrimination. This is **inclusive schooling** which our Canadian colleague, Gordon Porter, simply defines as delivering education through *learning environments where all children learn with their peers in community schools.*

The fourth goal in the United Nations *2030 Goals for Sustainable Development* calls on us to *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all.* In many countries, governments, national NGOs and more local initiatives are seeking to advance this goal. The changes required are fundamental. Governments and others can help establish positive conditions for reform but these efforts can only progress if **schools** find ways of transforming themselves.

These notes are addressed to people who take up the challenge of offering leadership for school transformation. This transformation starts from our values and an educational philosophy that embraces differences and values the uniqueness each student brings to their schooling. Such leadership involves working with others to create and refine a school improvement strategy that through sustained efforts engages the many elements required for success. Diagram I below provides an overview of these processes. The notes which follow offer a succinct guide to each element.

Diagram I. A MODEL FOR SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

School improvement process

Attending to **10 Strategic themes**

Always asking **Three review questions**

Towards the Fully Inclusive School

Develop vision

Widen participation

Review current reality

Continuing the spiral

Leaders come together

Identify priorities for improvement

Learn from experience

Take actions to advance progress

Leadership

Participation

Vision

Change process

Practice improvement

Peer support

Capacity development

Checking progress

Looking outwards

Sustainability

1. What's working?

2. What's not working?

3. What more is possible?

All students

- present

- participating

- achieving

TIMELINE: Milestones in the journey to inclusive schooling

1. Leadership

Schools are complex organisations involving hundreds of people every day, in the case of students for several years, in a wide range of activities. They need management to give order to these activities and make sure that the resources and systems are in place to deliver their educational purpose. They also need *leadership* that simultaneously articulates a coherent vision of quality inclusive schooling, builds support for this vision among a wide range of participants and promotes a culture within which there is strong encouragement to critical reflection and learning from experience. Indeed schools need leadership to inspire and orchestrate all the processes summarised in the model represented in Diagram I.

This leadership can - and should - come from many sources: school principals and others with designated leadership roles, of course, but also grass-roots teachers, support staff, families and students themselves. Wherever the stimulus to transformation comes from, successful change will need to gain a clear mandate from principals and the school governance structures in order to ensure that the journey to inclusion is fully embedded in all the important ways in which the school works, for example the annual planning for school improvement. This means in turn that, beyond the principal, there will need to be a multi-stakeholder team (or network of teams) which are championing inclusion and supporting a wide variety of innovations which realise the vision in practice. Inclusive schooling requires whole school transformation.

In relation to these different aspects of leadership (as with each of the ten themes), we can ask 'What is working? What is not working? and 'What more is possible?'

2. Participation

Schools are small communities with many different participants. Moreover they are embedded in wider local communities. Transformative change in the school needs the participation and support not just of educators but also this wider network including students, families and the other staff who make the school work for everyone. The change process needs to raise everyone's awareness of the benefits of inclusion and the need to combat discrimination.

Effective education requires that students are active participants in the classroom and in wider school improvement. Parents need to be involved with teachers in developing and delivering each child's educational programme. Parent associations can be important in promoting mutual aid and strengthening the demand for inclusive schooling. Support staff in the school - those who clean, cater, service the physical environment and provide security - are in close contact with students and an important part of the school culture: they also need to be part of welcoming diversity. The processes of change envisaged in Diagram I need to attend carefully to how all these interests can be involved appropriately in school improvement.

3. Vision

Transformative change requires an increasingly coherent and shared vision of inclusive schooling to drive a wide range of positive actions. In the Introduction, we followed Sir Ken Robinson in identifying the aims of education as being to enable students to...... become fulfilled individuals and active compassionate citizens. In a world of great diversity, inclusive schooling seeks as a matter of human rights to ensure that every young person has the opportunity to gain a high quality education alongside their peers in local schools. In this conception, differences among students are assets from which we all can learn, not deficits which make their inclusion problematic. Schools need to ensure that every student is present, participating and achieving.

UNESCO's *Reaching out to all learners* offers 16 indicators which define in more detail what this means in practice at the level of the whole school and at the level of the classroom: Diagram II. Combined with the three review questions, these offer a simple but powerful tool for planning school improvement.

4. Change process

Leadership, participation and vision are the first three elements in the continuous process of school improvement represented by the spiral in Diagram I. This journey starts when leaders come together to initiate or strengthen efforts to achieve purposeful change. It continues as they involve other staff, students and families in building a shared vision of inclusive schooling. Reviewing aspects of current performance against this vision, this growing variety of participants explore ways in which many aspects of school life might be improved. They identify priorities and seek the necessary support to make changes, small and large, which advance the journey towards fuller inclusion i.e. in which all students are benefitting. One product of this planning is likely to be a set of milestones for school progress in the coming year or longer. And they seek to learn from these efforts and innovations so as to continue the spiral of positive change.

All this of course needs organising and therefore a team (or teams) with the mandate to organise. It also needs 'space' i.e. the time and opportunities for different participants to reflect on their own experiences and contribute to making changes. And it needs support from a culture which understands the school as a *learning community,* an institution which grows 'organically' through encouraging reflection and dialogue, in which there is support for honestly questioning traditional activities and where all participants, especially teachers, are encouraged to be creative in their own practice.

Diagram II. Advancing key aspects of the vision

Indicators: **Whole school**	What's working?	What's not working?	What more is possible?	Proposed action
1. Everyone is made to feel welcome.				

Indicators: **Whole school**

1. Everyone is made to feel welcome.
2. Students are equally valued.
3. There are high expectations for all students.
4. Staff and students treat one another with respect.
5. There is partnership between staff and families.
6. The school is accessible to all students.
7. Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn.
8. The school monitors the presence, participation and achievement of all students.

Indicators: **Classroom**

1. Teaching is planned with all students in mind.
2. Lessons encourage the participation of all students.
3. Students are actively involved in their own learning.
4. Students are encouraged to support one another's learning.
5. Support is provided when students experience difficulties.
6. Classroom discipline is based on mutual respect and healthy living.
7. Students feel that they have somebody to speak to when they are worried or upset.
8. Assessment contributes to the achievement of all students.

What's working? What's not working? What more is possible? Proposed action

5. Practice improvement

We have made clear that school improvement starts from our commitment to embrace diversity and value each student's uniqueness. But values need to be demonstrated in practice. A critical focus for transformation are the many practices at the level of the school as a whole, the classroom and the individual student which enable everyone to learn to the best of their possibilities. Innovation at these three levels are interdependent. Diagram II identifies sixteen areas for attention here.

So at the level of the school, the vision of inclusive education and a culture welcoming diversity provide the context for developing and delivering a flexible curriculum and better teaching and learning. At this level too, schools should address the physical, material and attitudinal barriers to the equal participation of students, ensuring easy accessibility, the availability of aids and adaptations and positive approaches to diversity. At the level of the classroom, good teachers try to accommodate the needs of every student, through universal design for learning and through individual adjustments. This involves careful consideration to the way they manage lessons, the way they use additional teaching assistance and the adjustments they make to reflect individual differences: differentiating lessons so that all students can participate, personalising learning plans so as to set and assess achievable goals, promoting cooperative learning by grouping students in different ways and encouraging peer support for all learners.

Of course, this work is never completed: educational practice is always evolving as teachers gain experience and students change. Again we can keep asking 'What's working?' What's not working? and 'What more is possible?

6. Peer support

The great majority of the school community are students. In schools which lack material resources, the only well supplied asset is the students themselves. In a lot of time, inside and outside the school, students are mainly learning from each other, whether or not this learning follows the 'official' curriculum! Students are essential partners with staff in building an inclusive culture and supporting one another's learning. At the level of the school, students can be encouraged to take on leadership roles and become inclusion champions. In the playground and the sports field these champions can help to ensure cohesion in the school community. At the level of the classroom, they can be active contributors to collaborative learning and build peer relationships which help to ensure that everyone is both participating and learning.

7. Capacity development

Clearly transformational change is most dependent on developing the capacities of teachers and others to think inclusively and adapt their practices to increasing diversity in the school and classroom. Within the school, this requires a strong commitment to continuous professional development in which teachers and others get adequate opportunities and peer support to reflect on their experiences with others i.e. to be reflective practitioners. Schools are also likely to need some form of 'inclusion support team' (preferably internally but possibly drawing on outside expertise, for example from appropriate University Faculties of Education) which brings teaching and other professional (e.g. psychology, occupational therapy) skills, as well as family experience, to bear on the challenges of removing barriers and strengthening inclusive pedagogy.

8. Checking progress

Two ideas are central to the school improvement process: first, that at all levels the school is a learning community, drawing on a wide range of perspectives to get better at what it does; second, that this investment in learning from experience is always being encouraged through asking the three review questions, 'What's working? What's not working? and 'What more is possible?' Beyond this, the school needs to put in place appropriate systems and measures to monitor the presence, participation and achievement of all students through listening to teacher, family and student perspectives as well as tracking progress through a range of assessments. By appropriate we mean measuring what is important and doing this in ways which make efficient use of school time.

9. Looking outwards

We have focused so far on the school as an institution and as a small community, acting for itself to deliver better education for all students. But of course schools are embedded in wider systems and networks: they must always be looking outwards both to influence and learn from this wider environment. First, schools are part of local and national education systems: they are shaped by and should help shape education policies. Second, they are enmeshed in institutional and professional networks: these networks can be useful vehicles for sharing learning across school boundaries. Third, as we have already noted, they are part of their local communities from where students, staff and families all come: these communities are a resource to their schools and schools should be a resource to their communities.

10. Sustainability

More generally, schools are part of the wider society - a society characterised by high aspirations and a commitment to universal education but also by inequality, discrimination and exclusion. The inclusive school is always likely to experience pressures to import both these positive and negative features back into the school community. In this sense then, the work to transform education is never completed: change efforts have to find ways to bring enough of the elements described here together to make fully inclusive schooling *sustainable*....and to continue asking 'What more is possible?'

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