

## Equality, diversity and inclusion

“We should pay less attention to getting everyone over the same hill using the same path. We may wish some to take different routes to the same end. We might see good reasons for paying careful attention to their description of what they found on route!”

*Tom West – In the Mind's Eye*

The United Kingdom has a diverse population and some of this diversity brings with it a range of social and educational issues that practitioners will need to recognise, understand and work with. All practitioners must work in a way that supports equality of opportunity and promotes diversity and inclusion. But what do we mean by equality, diversity and inclusion?

The government has a mandate to 'build a safe, just and tolerant society for everyone in the UK, regardless of their race, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability or age. Practitioners who value diversity and promote There are various pieces of legislation in place to promote equality and reduce discrimination. These include: equality of opportunity and inclusion will tend to work in a person-centred way, focusing on individual strengths and needs, striving to improve the quality of participation of all the children and young people with whom they work.

There are various pieces of legislation in place to promote equality and reduce discrimination. These include:

- The Disability Discrimination Act 2005
- The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001
- The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989)
- The Human Rights Act 1998
- The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 (as amended)
- Employment Equality Regulations 2003

The aim of all this legislation is to promote equality of opportunity for all, regardless of age, sex, sexuality, disability, race, religion or any other difference. The legislation should have an impact on the way organisations provide and organise services and on the way practitioners approach their practice. However, whilst legislation is important because it protects people, the one thing it cannot do is change people's attitudes. Good practice should ensure that practitioners are constantly able to evaluate what they do and to receive appropriate support and training in this area.

## **Supporting children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities**

When working with children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities practitioners should focus on what people can do rather than what they can't do. The Special Educational Needs Code of Conduct (DfES, 2001) sets out fundamental principles that should be used when working with children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

## **Parenting workers**

When working with parents to support children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, you will need to be aware of the principles of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice and the models of disability highlighted below.

The **social model of disability** views discrimination and prejudice as being rooted in the barriers of attitude, environment and organisation of society. The focus of work is therefore on who the child is, not on their disability. Attention is put on his/her likes and dislikes and on supporting him/her to live as full and active a life as possible.

The **medical model of disability** views disabled children and young people as being in some way deficient. IN the medical model attention is focussed on 'impairments' that the child has and tries to 'fix' them.

## **Prejudice and discrimination**

Social inequalities are present in all societies in one form or another, influencing every aspect of people's lives and attitudes. This is because society is made up of individuals who hold a spectrum of values, beliefs and opinions. Some of these are based on prejudice and discrimination.

Prejudice can be defined as unfavourable opinion or feeling formed beforehand without knowledge, thought or reason; discrimination can be defined as treating a person less favourably than others in the same or similar circumstances.

There is evidence to suggest that discrimination can lead to extremely negative life consequences for children and young people. Key questions for practitioners are:

- How can I ensure my practice is not discriminatory?
- How can I promote equality of opportunity?
- What is good practice in this area?

All practitioners must understand that there is absolutely no form of discrimination or harassment that is in any way acceptable. If a child, young person, parent or colleague behaves in a discriminatory way, the practitioner has a responsibility to challenge them – with a clear idea about why they are challenging them and how to do it as effectively as possible.

Anti-discriminatory practice involves practitioners in the examination of their own values, beliefs, attitudes and expectation to ensure that they work proactively to give all children, young people and parents equality of opportunity at all times. To work in an anti-discriminatory way practitioners need to have knowledge of relevant equal opportunities legislation and what this means for their practice, as well as knowledge of their organisation's policies and codes of practice. Children, young people and parents have a

right to a genuine commitment from practitioners to the concepts and practices that underpin equal rights legislation and policies, rather than tokenistic behaviours.

The promotion of equality of opportunity involves respect for all people and valuing their individuality and personal circumstances. It also involves encouraging and fostering a positive learning environment.

### **Inclusion**

Inclusive working is built on promoting equal opportunities and therefore anti-discriminatory practice. It means working flexibly, operating structures and systems that take into account what each individual can offer and what each individual needs. Inclusion involves a focus on ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to be engaged and involved in mainstream community life. Practitioners need to be aware of and work to overcome any barriers to inclusion, because promoting inclusion and combating discrimination will:

- Enhance service users' satisfaction and better meet their needs
- Increase the confidence of local and diverse communities
- Create a safe and inclusive environment for all
- Enhance democracy and accountability
- Reduce personal and financial costs.

Booth and Ainscow (2000) developed an index for inclusion in which inclusion is seen as a principled approach to education and society. It is an attempt to put into action values concerned with equity, participation, respect for diversity, community, rights, compassion and sustainability.

It could be argued that exclusion is a consequence of barriers to inclusion. In addition to the barriers created by undervaluing diversity and inequality of opportunity, there are many other barriers to inclusion. One of the problems is that the longer the child, young person or parent is left outside the mainstream, the more problematic the task of re-engaging and reintegrating them becomes. The Index for inclusion suggests approaches to becoming more inclusive, involving three interconnected dimensions, as shown in the diagram below:-

