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case study

Stockport black and minority ethnic children's project

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Introduction

This is the story of how black and minority ethnic (BME) communities in Stockport have worked together, with community development support, to show the human meaning of some grand ideas – community cohesion and social inclusion. Since 2004, Stockport's B&ME communities have been using Childrens Fund money to support their children's activities, leading to the award of Learning Exemplar status at the RENEW Northwest Exemplar event in November 2006. The RENEW Good Practice case study summarises the work of the project:

Summary¹

Seven different minority ethnic communities came together, with help from Stockport's Children's Fund, to provide classes and resources to help their children learn about their heritage and culture.

The Challenge

Stockport's black and minority ethnic (BME) communities are scattered and under-resourced in comparison with other urban areas. Children attend predominantly white schools and have had few opportunities to explore their identity and take pride in their communities' heritage. In the past there has been no funding available to enable community groups to employ tutors.

The Solution

The Stockport BME Children's Project enabled community groups to provide high quality education for children aged between five and 13. Tutors have been employed from within the seven community groups involved in the scheme. Classes are conducted on a professional basis with appropriate learning plans, child protection procedures and resources. A steering committee ensured that funding was shared equitably between the different organisations, which ranged from a Muslim welfare association and a group for African and Caribbean young people to a newly-formed Chinese organisation.

The people

The separate community groups were Nia Kuumba (African and Caribbean group), Jinq Lina

¹ Available from: <http://www.renew.co.uk/Pages/Article.aspx?id=123&articleid=1344>

(Chinese), Refugee Support (supporting up to 25 nationalities) and three Asian Muslim community organisations (APPNA Family group, Heaton Muslims, Muslim Welfare Centre Edgeley), each using hired community facilities. JAK Community Choir and Cheadle Muslims were also involved in the first two years.

The Funding

The original funding of £75000 a year plummeted to a £45000 annual grant after central Government cuts to the Stockport Childrens Fund. For that money, in the current year the communities organised 660 sessions for 134 children aged 5-13, with 12 paid sessional tutors and over 25 volunteers. Unit cost – 50p per child per session, and untold value in the hours given by the 25 volunteers: if we use the formula promoted by the Institute for Volunteering Research, that “ for every £1 spent by the public sector on volunteering there is an economic payback of £30”, then we’d be driving our calculators wild.²

This is the driest part of the story, however, and the real human meaning is enshrined in Community Development principles and ways of working with people - it’s about doing it together, not having it done to you. As the very irritating song says, “It ain’t wot you do, it’s the way that you do it”. This is the story of the way that we all did it together, by concentrating on getting the project management systems sorted so we could focus on the human beings, building friendly relationships and inter-group communication as we all tackled the mutual challenges of running a community project.

The Story

The starting place was the individual BME communities developing their own activities separately. Most of the BME community groups described in this story initially organised themselves through key activists taking the initiative. The CD team had helped some of these groups to develop their strengths, and had a long history of working with the communities to raise their profile and challenge those who thought they might be “hard to reach”. From 1997, Black History Month celebrations and educational events brought the groups together to showcase their work and raise issues, including a Diversity and Partnership Working Conference in 2001 which enabled public sector agencies to meet the communities to explore how to meet the communities’ needs more effectively. The various elements of the project and its development are discussed in the next five sections:

1. About the need

A community development audit from 2001-2003 showed the shared need in BME communities for paid sessional workers to help organise children’s activities, gain more support from CD workers, and receive more help in paying for community meeting places, equipment and expenses. It was the shared community need for better support for their children which gave the opportunity for developing a collective B&ME Children’s Project. The need was grounded in a fundamental principle of CD, which emphasises community ownership of issues and responses. The real experts about their own lives, the communities, listened to their children’s experiences of isolation in predominantly white schools, and saw an old story in danger of repeating itself: isolated children under stress, lacking positive self-identity, living in confusion amid conflicting cultural worlds, and struggling to be recognised within the mainstream schools where few role models existed.

2. Struggling groups

From 1995 -2003, the communities had acted separately and started to develop their own after-school educational activities for their children. Some of the communities had been struggling to sustain childrens activities; Nia Kuumba, with help from the CD team, gained grants and Black play workers in 2000 but they struggled to bring together geographically-scattered Black residents to a play centre near the town centre. APPNA Asian Family Group had even been traveling 12 miles to a Manchester Islamic centre every night, as there was no local after-school provision for Muslim children, and in 2000 had decided that they should develop a venue in their hometown. Other communities faced similar struggles; isolated from each other, they struggled without the influence to gain significant resources. The essential elements of venues, expenses for volunteers, pay for tutors, transport costs, were all dependent on small local grants and their own pockets.

² The Community Foundation, Available from: <http://www.ivr.org.uk/researchbulletins/bulletins/public-sector-support-for-volunteering-an-audit.htm>

3. The Children's Fund

When the Children's Fund was created by the Government in 2003 to provide additional support for children in 5-13 age range, the CD team saw a rare opportunity to attract significant funding to the BME communities in Stockport – previously it had been difficult to secure adequate funding because of the numbers game (a relatively small population of B&ME compared to the rest of the region, and Stockport's relative affluence) and the relative weakness of the individual B&ME organisations. At last, four positive factors coincided; the communities' self-help projects, the existence of proper external funding, the Race Relations Amendment Act 2001 (which defined the duty of the public sector to actively promote positive race relations), and new evidence which showed that BME children were the fastest growing group within the Borough.

The project bid to the local Childrens Fund executive was created by the whole of the CD team on an away day (as at that point it would have been a daunting process for any community group to respond within tight deadlines). The team's knowledge of community need and ability to respond as active communities was vital in securing the grant of £75000 to the new BME Childrens Project. In supporting the project, the Childrens Fund criteria of educational attainment was effectively broadened to encompass the precondition for it to happen, through developing the children's cultural awareness as the starting point for greater confidence and self-esteem.

4. Project Management

In the early days, it was a headache for everyone involved to get the project running smoothly – a BME Liaison worker, Sudipta Bhattharjee, was recruited (using part of the Children's Fund grant) - to help provide day-to-day support to the communities, who were facing a steep learning curve in meeting all of the demands of an external funding regime and a performance management culture. How could the CD Team empower the communities when so much of the early work demanded community's adherence to bureaucratic demands from the funding body: keeping registers, writing lesson plans, sending invoices for payment in arrears, recruiting tutors, understanding and applying health and safety procedures, gaining CRB clearance...? Would it change the ownership and direction of the communities' projects and destroy the very spirit, which made the projects possible in the first place?

For the CD Team, this was a real dilemma: in the first year the CD team really were Project Managers in the fullest sense, feeling in danger of appearing to be the bosses of the community rather than its servants because of the continual and evolving demands of the funding regime. The CD Team felt that They were constantly saying "No, you can't use the money for that, it's not within the funder's criteria" or "You can't have the money without returning all of the paperwork and invoices, lesson plans or registers" or "Your CRB check hasn't cleared because they need another proof of identity". But gradually, through the great skills of the team's admin worker, the communities began to understand new systems and were getting into the habit of meeting the demands without hassle. In effect, turning the project back to CD rather than management of community, through supporting the communities to self-manage each aspect of the administrative work. The B&ME Liaison worker eventually had an agreed checklist to share with communities on her visits, covering every aspect of admin and health and safety, helping to make these processes less arduous.

5. Community development

With the aim of increasing community strength in running the project, the CD team developed training for the volunteers in funding bids six community projects, to begin the process of creating shared ownership of the overall project.

And so the community development began to take shape; the CD Team still faced the demands of project management within strict external conditions but realised they could help the communities to move towards increasing levels of self-management by helping them explore and devise systems which would meet funders requirements but would mean something to them as well. The CD team had to develop space for face-to-face discussions between communities and tutors so that everyone could own the organisation process - when previously self-employed sessional tutors had to become Council employees to meet external audit recommendations, the CD Team worked alongside communities and tutors to explore how to make the potentially dis-empowering situation work under

the control of the communities. The induction process brought together tutors and their committee representatives and it was agreed that the tutors initially seek support and guidance from their community organisation and if there are unresolved difficulties to bring it to the CD team for consideration – and the CD Team agreed to bring the issues back to committees if they needed a management decision. In practice, the hardest problems were caused by lack of ongoing tutor support in the early days of the project, so they now set about increasing the levels of support for the tutors to end their isolation from each other.

In the process, two of the original groups (Cheadle Muslim Association and JAK) left the project in 2005-6 as they had other demanding projects to concentrate on. Two new community groups replaced them. A Council worker from the Ethnic Diversity Service developed a new Chinese organisation, Jing Ling, to meet local childrens' needs. Refugee Support joined in 2006 as a voluntary project that needed to develop childrens' activities at their Saturday drop-in, to bring the children together and allow some space for their parents to meet each other.

As the communities' steering group began to debate the key issues, the CD Team workers began to move into the role of facilitators of meetings and promoters of equality within the project, so that stronger groups didn't overwhelm the others. The workers facilitated discussions on really sticky issues, such as the funder's refusal to allow religious activity to be funded – in particular, community groups had to learn to express Islamic studies as part of a programme of acquiring mother-tongue languages, cultural and historical studies, and promoting community cohesion through showcasing their work through public events such as Black History Month and EID Melas.

It is often true in CD (and life in general) that a major obstacle can make or break the people; facing obstacles & responding positively deepens the strength. A key moment in the life of the project was how the community steering group tackled its the biggest challenge to the cohesion of their shared work, when a national cut in the Children's Fund led to local cut, taking the project from £75000 to £45000. In the first meeting to discuss how to reallocate the budgets, it became clear that the steering group members were dividing over self-interest and in danger of competing against each other for greater shares. The CD team suggested that a second meeting should focus on each community sharing information about what they were doing with the money, and how it was meeting childrens' needs, and what would happen to their children if the project ended. The resulting empathy between the groups meant that they were able to agree to reallocate the money so that no one's financial survival was put at stake. This created new levels of trust and recognition of each other's worth. And this is the key to everything positive which followed.

By focussing on their children, the communities had kept their eye on what really mattered and this really helped them to respond positively to their children's rights to have a say in the activities. Children's satisfaction surveys were developed as playful exercises with the support of the Childrens Fund's Participation worker. The surveys revealed a complex picture – some children wanted more play and less adult-led education, others wanted the noisier children to be quieter so that education could take place. At the same time, the tutors views were surveyed, and led to a fascinating discussion amongst the community representatives at the steering group about the contradictions revealed, and these insights provided the ownership of the issues necessary for the communities to recognise tutor's multiple needs for support and training in play and education aspects. The Supplementary Schools Advisor from Manchester reassured the communities that play and education were both extremely important, and that play is in itself educational. Since then, the CD team has devised a training programme with the tutors. Community representatives, members and tutors also attended Safeguarding Children training. This shows how evaluation can be really dynamic in creating the stimulus to change and improve, and puts all of the other data in the shade.

In November 2006, the CD Team and a tutor, Mrs Nusrat Ahmed, presented the project to a RENEW Regeneration Panel and were awarded the status of a Learning Exemplar in the North West: The judges praised the "thoughtful and determined approach to working with and between different communities, meeting their individual needs, resolving conflicts and delivering tangible outcomes". This RENEW award brought recognition, self-confidence, and potential credibility with future funders, and led to the continued support from RENEW in thinking about sustainable funding. Despite the loss of the Senior Community Development Officer who had been instrumental in the growth of the work,

the CD Team continued to support new phases of community empowerment, and in the past six months have supported the evolution of the community Steering Group into an independent community organisation, Stockport Communities United Forum, so that they could apply for external grants as a united, cohesive project. The new title reflects the communities' thinking about community cohesion: while membership of the new organisation "shall be open to all Black and Minority Ethnic community members of all age groups in Stockport and surrounding districts" it is also embracing "other Stockport residents who share our aims". This also draws the focus away from the BME label: while it is still being widely used, it has its absurdities - as the Chinese worker said, "Chinese people don't see ourselves as minority ethnic - have you ever been to China? There's millions of us"; Asian communities felt similarly about this badge of convenience.

The aims in the new Constitution proudly proclaims:

" To develop a strong and inclusive Black and Minority Ethnic community organisation to provide supplementary schools for Black and Minority Ethnic children in Stockport, providing play, cultural and educational opportunities in community settings, and to develop community groups for all age groups".

So there's still a lot of work to be done: the communities will be bidding to the new version of the Childrens Fund in Jan 2008 for extended funding from September 2008, but will also target other funders, and will be reaching out to professionals to seek partnership and influence, as part of the Extended Schools agenda.

Lessons Learnt

It's a massive amount of work for so many unpaid volunteers. The magic ingredient that keeps it alive is the mutual commitment to positive outcomes for children - through this work, the children are developing self-esteem through greater understanding of their identity, awareness of their cultural roots and the other cultures they exist within.

Some of the groups took the initiative in the earlier days without any professional community development support. Community self-help is going on all of the time in this country, with or without professional support. And this is a key factor which makes community development flourish: deeper than any survey can capture, more dynamic than any professionally-led needs analysis, the communities analysed and acted; they brought desire and commitment to move on an issue and attempt to create their own solution, reaching out wherever they could to find empathetic professional support. Community development is a vital resource in helping society to run, and without this support the communities face intolerable struggles. It has also been essential that a team including BME workers has provided the community development support, and the day-to-day liaison worker has kept the communities close to the team at all stages

Conclusion

Finally, to all professionals and decision-makers: Community Development is about communities becoming stronger to tackle their own issues and finding willing partners on their terms. What gives it a chance of growing and surviving is that the communities want it and control it. As Covey says, "No ownership - no involvement". So "it ain't wot you do", it's the way you help them do it.

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