

**Mandeville School**  
**Community Conversations**  
Thursday 15 November 2018



*In north-east India, high in the mountains of Meghalaya, the summer monsoons are so heavy that the rivers running through its valleys grow wild and unpredictable, making them impossible to cross. Centuries ago, the villagers came up with an ingenious solution. They planted a strangler fig on the riverbank and began to tease its roots across the river until they took hold on the opposite side.*

*Through a slow process of binding and weaving the roots together, the villagers created a robust, living bridge that could withstand the deluge of the summer rains. Because it is a work that cannot be completed in any one person's lifetime, the knowledge of how to bind and tend to the roots has to be passed on to each of the younger generations who keep the practice alive, contributing to what is now a magnificent network of living root bridges throughout the valleys of Meghalaya.*

We held three conversations across the day. The morning session was very well attended by parents/carers and a number of school staff, including the headteacher. A Russian interpreter was present for one of the parents. A conversation with children was had, late morning. The afternoon session was offered an additional perspective due to the presence and engagement of the Chair and Vice Chair of Mandeville Governing Body.

This paper reports on the two conversations held involving adults, specifically, what was discussed and ideas generated through conversation. It concludes with the very clear messages offered by a group of enthusiastically engaged children.

We began both of the adult sessions by considering the messages inherent in the story shared above. Are we bold enough to plant a tree in the Mandeville Community, in looking to form a boundary spanning relationship, families-school-community, knowing that it may take time before it reveals its full potential and strength? Are we willing to accept the responsibility for creating a legacy we hand down as we pass on through, something that defines Mandeville as a community?

We considered the values and way of working that underpins the community organising tradition. Saul David Alinsky was an American community organizer and writer. He is generally considered to be the founder of modern community organizing. Alinsky, according to Time Magazine in 1970, was a “prophet of power to the people,” someone who “has possibly antagonised more people... than any other living American.” On being asked why he does the work he did, Alinsky replied, “I can’t stand to see people get pushed around.” Alinsky believed that:

“The first thing you've got to do in a community is listen, not talk, and learn to eat, sleep, breathe only one thing: the problems and aspirations of the community.”

For, “You organise with your ears, not your mouth.”

We reflected on how, typically, we listen to one another, home to school, and school to home.

In doing this, we considered what Rabbi Dara Frimmer has to say, as shared through her TEDTalk in 2015 (<https://youtu.be/-DtlLpmsCca>) Dara Frimmer is a Rabbi at Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles. Rabbi Frimmer was recognized in 2014 as the Human Rights Rabbi of the Year by T'ruah, the national Jewish justice organization. The award recognised her leadership at Isaiah, among interfaith communities in Los Angeles, and nationally, on issues of health, environment, education, hunger and human rights. Rabbi Frimmer's talk poses two questions: Can true change be made by one person? Or does change occur more efficiently when others are involved? For, one of the biggest challenges we face as agents of social change is that we forget to learn people's stories as we attempt to enlist them in our cause.

Rabbi Frimmer points out that what we care about is deeply connected to who we are, our life experiences, our pain and disappointment as well as our greatest joy. She says that if we can just remember to get at those sorts of stories and share those of our own we are far more likely to create a network of committed people who are ready to bring about social change.

This takes us back to the African proverb shared by one gentleman who participated in our Community Conversation Day held at Mandeville on 20th June.

*A person who shares, in a group, a problem, does not intend to disrupt.*

The parent offered explanation of this idea in saying that the action of sharing a personal burden with a community group transfers responsibility, opening up possibilities for collective wisdom to bring about a better solution. He was keen to stress that this is not a disruptive or selfish act but one that is expected, according to community norms and values.

This idea would absolutely resonate with Rabbi Frimmer, who expresses it thus:

*“Stories remind us that what we think are deeply personal, private issues are in fact shared public concerns. Imagine if we began to work on any of these shared issues together.”*

Gerardo Calderón was born and raised in El Salvador. Calderón suggests that many of the large social movements throughout history are strongly marked with the central leading figures, those who we call heroes. But real social movement comes from the supporting community that stand in the shadow. In a TEDTalk he gave in 2014 (<https://youtu.be/WdHBWL4LK88>), Calderón, drawing from his personal experiences in social movements, discusses what he calls the real heroes of social justice. Calderón begins his talk by sharing his inner and outer response to a question once posed by one of his American friends. He was asked “Which kind of superheroes do you guys in El Salvador have?” Calderón says that he responded with, “We don’t really have superheroes down there.” Then he thought on his own response. He realised that in his country:

*“... since the very beginning in the family and in schools we are taught that if we want to see change, if we want to foster change, we have to get together with other people, build relationships and act as a family, act as a community. That’s why we don’t really feel the need of superheroes.”*

Accepting the value there is in actively listening to one another’s personal narratives we again reflected on traditional modes of listening, more so school listening to families and community. What can we learn from the ways of working of socially critical researchers such as Professor John Smyth? Professor Smyth says:

*“One of the things I never presume is to know the existential reality of worlds I am investigating, indeed, I regard it is being presumptuous to even know what might be significant questions of the informants in these contexts.*

*“What I am saying is that my ‘warrant to know’, comes from the lives of the informants I am working with, not from knowledge gleaned while sitting in my office or from the academy!”*

Plenty to contemplate as we prepared to set about thinking on planting that tree in the Mandeville Community!

Before doing so we reflected on key themes we identified as essential building blocks, shared in conversation back in June. References made to family-school-community relationship was rich in words and phrases such as, ‘family’, ‘community’, “home from home”, and “peace of mind”. This is seen to be held together through ‘empathy’, ‘connectedness’, ‘listening’, and ‘understanding’, as expressed in the words used. This relationship is underpinned by ‘trust’, ‘respect’, ‘responsibility’, and ‘love’.

And so to the task... Can we identify personal issues that are in fact shared public (Mandeville Community) concerns? How can we, collectively, address such issues? All the while, seeing parents/carers as ‘informants’, for it is their lived reality that needs to be understood.

### **Issue 1: Visiting the barber or hairdressers**

This was identified as a challenging experience for many of the Mandeville children. Personal stories were shared in groups and then across groups, with key action points recorded by group scribes.

1. Introduce barber / hairdresser to the school and the children. Train them.
2. Nursery staff can then take children to the local barber.

3. Emphasise pretend barber play at Nursery to prepare children. Invite parents to role play.
4. Identify a local barber/hairdresser - one who can come into school regularly.
5. Have barber/hairdresser show parents how to cut their own child's hair - support until comfortable.
6. Invite barbers/hairdressers into school to talk with both parents and staff.
7. In 6. (above) focus on parents sharing their stories / their realities + those of their children.
8. Continue the conversations in 6. (above) and design, together, training packages and thinking on appropriate environments etc.

## **Issue 2: Visiting the G.P. Surgery**

This was identified as a challenging experience for many of the Mandeville children. Personal stories were shared in groups and then across groups, with key action points recorded by group scribes.

1. Emphasise pretend doctor/nurse play at Nursery to prepare children. Invite parents to role play.
2. School to request real G.P. equipment from surgeries or through a charitable organisation so able to model use of real equipment.
3. Request sensory rooms at Surgery/Hospital, so allowing children to get comfortable before examination.
4. Equip the sensory room with practice tools for familiarisation, and then have G.P. examine child in the sensory room.
5. Reduce waiting time - surgery contacts parents to say when to come in.
6. Raise awareness (train) in G.P.s - how change in environment impacts child's behaviour.
7. Invite G.P.s / Nurses into school to talk with both parents and staff.
8. In 7. (above) focus on parents sharing their stories / their realities + those of their children.

9. Continue the conversations in 7. (above) and design, together, training packages and thinking on appropriate environments etc.

### **Issue 3: Visiting the supermarket / shops**

This was identified as a challenging experience for many of the Mandeville children. Personal stories were shared in groups and then across groups, with key action points recorded by group scribes.

1. Request 'Special Needs Hour' at local supermarket.
2. Organise school trips to the supermarket, familiarising children with the shopping experience - with a till reserved for the children.
3. Request 'Autism Hour' at local supermarket.
4. Request exploration of ideas on opening up tills for some, to make the shopping and packing experience manageable and safer.
5. Invite shop managers / shopkeepers into school to talk with both parents and staff.
6. In 5. (above) focus on parents sharing their stories / their realities + those of their children.
7. Continue the conversations in 5. (above) and design, together, training packages and thinking on appropriate environments etc.

Other things that featured in conversation included:

- Seeking to develop partnerships with mainstream schools to raise awareness of special needs and disability, aimed at promoting understanding in the young.
  - Denise (Head Teacher) shared that the new head teacher of Horsenden Primary School, next door, had shown an openness to such an idea.
- How we might hold more fund-raising events to back the sorts of initiatives suggested.
- More emotional support for parents.

- More after school clubs / activities at school.

Broader issues, of a more societal nature, included:

- Applying pressure on local/national government to consider issuing parking permits (Blue badges) for families of children with a diagnosis such as Autism - in the interests of safety and to make the experience of going out into the community easier / doable.
- Raising awareness and understanding in young people and society generally about special needs and disability

### SCHOOL WEBSITE

Common to all conversations was reference made to the school website and how that might be developed as an accessible resource for parents/carers and school. Further, that it could be a window to all that is happening and being developed in Mandeville - sharing practice, ideas and innovation with the outside world. There is a strong desire for this to happen across all community members; parents/carers, staff, school leaders, and governors. Information and knowledge gathered from one's own personal experience and journey was clearly viewed as valuable and parents passionately expressed a want to share that with others. This is something that marked conversation back in June when a real desire to address isolation in the community by sharing issues and supporting one another featured strongly. It was notable that staff and parents valued this as being of reciprocal benefit; very much a two-way process.

### EVENT in SCHOOL

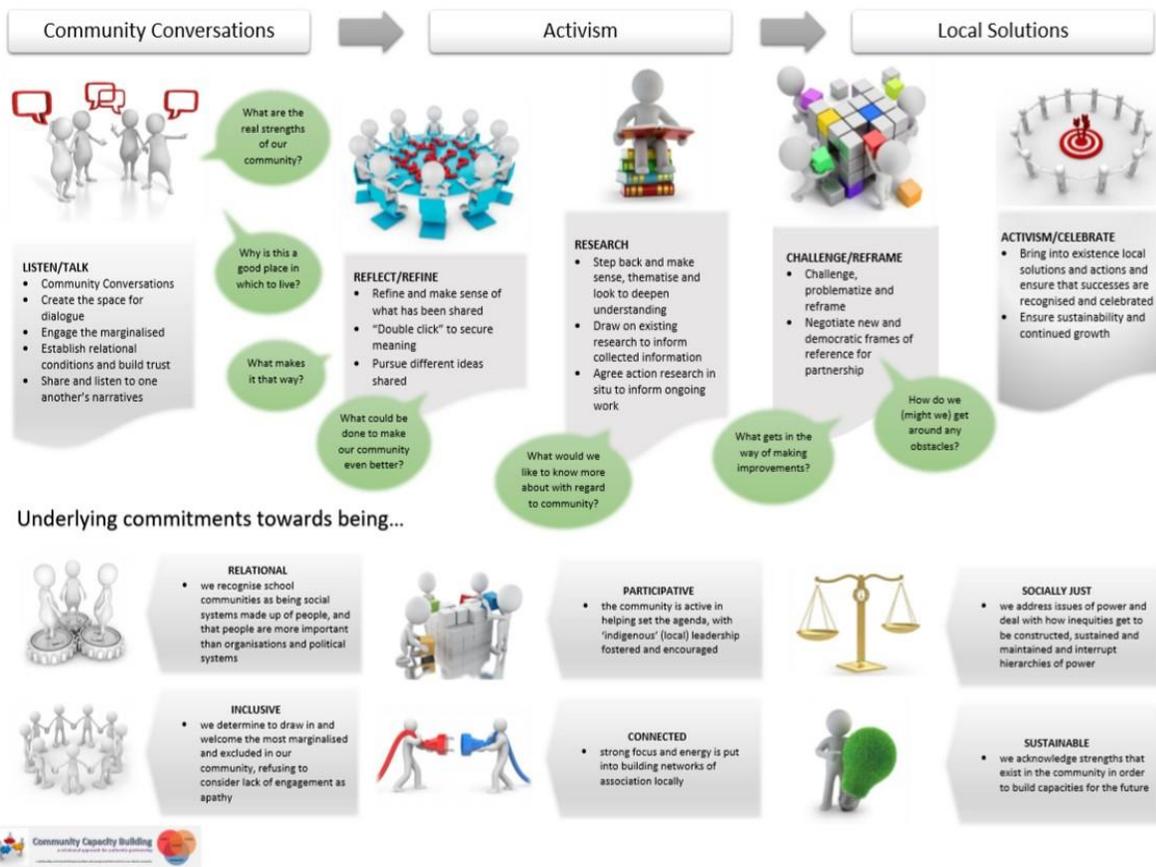
The afternoon session was offered extended perspective by the presence of the Chair of Governors, Vice Chair, Head Teacher (also attended morning session), Deputy Headteacher and School Business Manager. It was at this session that extra focus was applied to what an awareness raising event, opening the school up to the community, might look like. There exists an incredibly strong commitment to this from parents motivated to step up and lead on raising awareness locally and in society in general by sharing their own personal stories; their reality. Their determination to do so is founded

on their want to make things better not just for their own child/children but all children and families in the Mandeville community and beyond. The nature of the event was discussed and it was felt that the target audience in the first instance would be key people involved in organisations identified in Issues 1, 2 and 3, shared above. This might mean more than one event but the target audience would include: barbers / hairdressers; shop managers / shopkeepers; doctors / nurses / medical practice managers. Also advanced was the idea that we might extend an invitation to local leaders such as counsellors, the local member of parliament, and key local authority officers.

### CHILDREN

Mandeville pupil voice was captured in conversation with a group of children. The children were shown a range of images, with a view to gauging whether or not their experience of that in the image was a positive or negative one. The images ranged from ones of Northala Fields, Horsenden Community Garden, Perivale Canal, Westfields Shopping Centre, to a farm, a library, a minibus, a London Underground train, Tesco, Lidl, to a doctor, and a boy having his haircut. Response to most images was very positive. It was notable that the image of the doctor, the hospital / surgery, and the boy having his haircut, drew a mixed response, with some exhibiting strongly negative reactions. Even those who settled on a positive wavered, taking time to decide. When the children in the group completed an activity posting cut outs of the same images on a picture board, placing them under 'like' (happy face) or 'don't like' (sad face) the outcome was the same. A discomfort in some around experience with doctors and experience at the barber's / hairdresser's was very evident.

Adopting the community capacity building model at Mandeville has been significantly eased by the wonderful receptivity of the children, parents/carers, staff and governors. That and the willingness to embrace vulnerability and boldly and clearly share personal stories so that others might benefit and the learning be carried forward. Community conversations held in June and November have encouraged activism and will lead to the local solutions we pursue.



## REFERENCES

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