



# ACHIEVING QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL

A short guide for transformational leaders

David Towell

*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*  
- United Nations Sustainable Development Goal, No. 4



## Introduction

Across the globe there is widespread understanding that a better future for today's children and young people in our increasingly diverse societies depends on achieving quality education for all. The fourth of the globally-agreed United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) quoted on the cover expresses this powerfully in terms of three main axes for progress, relating to quality, inclusion and equity. This is a challenging agenda for leaders at all levels. As an important UNESCO and European Agency document puts this ([A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education](#) 2017), implementing the message that 'every learner matters and matters equally' will likely require 'changes in thinking and practice at every level of an education system, from classroom teachers and others who provide educational experiences directly, to those responsible for national policy.'

There are several aspects to this challenge. Each of these three main concepts are contested and difficult to operationalise in our divided and unequal societies. Education systems are large and complex. Multiple interests are involved in achieving change. For all these reasons, the journey to better outcomes is likely to be a long one. And as the quote above implies, innovation cannot be merely 'grafted on' to traditional arrangements: rather change strategies need to be purposeful, systemic and sustained. Indeed pursuing SDG4 requires *transformational change* in public education systems.

As a way of assisting educational leaders (students and families as well as teachers and policy-makers), my distinguished Canadian colleague, Gordon Porter, and I have produced four pamphlets\* (the Spanish language versions are pictured on the cover) seeking to document how these challenges are being met in promising examples of progress drawn from countries we know in different parts of the world. Three of these focus attention on different levels in national systems: **P1**, the whole system (where our case study reports on the Canadian province of New Brunswick); **P2**, the school (where we include seven case studies from schools in Canada, United Kingdom, Bolivia, Colombia and Peru), and **P3**, the classroom (where we interviewed teachers in all these countries). The fourth, **P4**, explores how a sample of family associations (in Canada, Colombia, Peru, Spain and New Zealand) have sought to support families in securing quality education for their own children while exercising influence to improve education for all. Of course, in these different countries the national context for change (the political system, state of economic development, strength of civil society associations etc.) varies considerably. Nevertheless, we think it possible to identify many common insights from experience in different places. This short guide looks across these four pamphlets to identify lessons for those at all levels and in all parts of the system seeking to offer leadership for transformational change.

We have organised this guide around seven main themes:

- **Achieving clarity of purpose**
- **Engaging the whole system**
- **Using different levers for change**
- **Partnering with students and their families**
- **Planning the journey towards transformation**
  - **Developing effective practice**
- **Establishing education as a learning system**

## Achieving clarity of purpose

*The fundamental purpose of education is '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'*

- Ken Robinson (Creative Schools, Penguin, 2016)

The three axes of SDG4 direct our attention to quality, inclusion and equity. These are not independent axes but achieving strategic change requires widespread efforts to clarify these ideas and ensure that they inform culture, policy and practice at all levels.

Access to *quality* education is a human right for all. The quotation above, linked to this right, offers an approach to defining quality starting from its intended outcomes: quality education is effective in delivering this purpose for all students, recognising that everyone is different. Therefore education needs a flexible approach to curriculum and its personalisation to each student. (We can readily see therefore that quality as defined here needs in turn quality teaching, quality schools and a wider system that promotes quality: there are many factors involved in ensuring good outcomes for all students.)

*Inclusion*, we understand, as delivering quality education through common learning environments where all young people learn with (and from) their peers and where diversity is seen to bring benefits to everyone. Historically a lot of the focus has been on students with disabilities but inclusion has to be about everyone being present, participating and achieving in the common learning environments. Indeed, social analysts increasingly recognise what they describe as 'intersectionality' here: types of difference, disadvantage and discrimination - poverty, gender, race, language, disability, etc. - are often mutually reinforcing. The inclusion axis requires that education seeks to address all the potential barriers to full and equal participation.

*Equity* (being fair to all) clearly overlaps with the previous two concepts. It requires that the system welcomes this diversity and invests effort of all kinds to ensure that every student experiences education positively and gains what they need to flourish in a rapidly changing world.

Transformation strategies need to operationalise these ideas more concretely in relation to different levels in the whole system. Another useful UNESCO publication ([Reaching Out To All Learners: A Resource Pack for Supporting Inclusive Education](#) 2016) identifies 16 characteristics of successful culture, policy and practice at the level of the school and classroom. (**Diagram I**, below)

These provide the basis for a practical self-evaluation tool that stakeholders in each school can use to review progress and plan action for school improvement.

### **Diagram I. Indicators of goal achievement within the school**

#### **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.

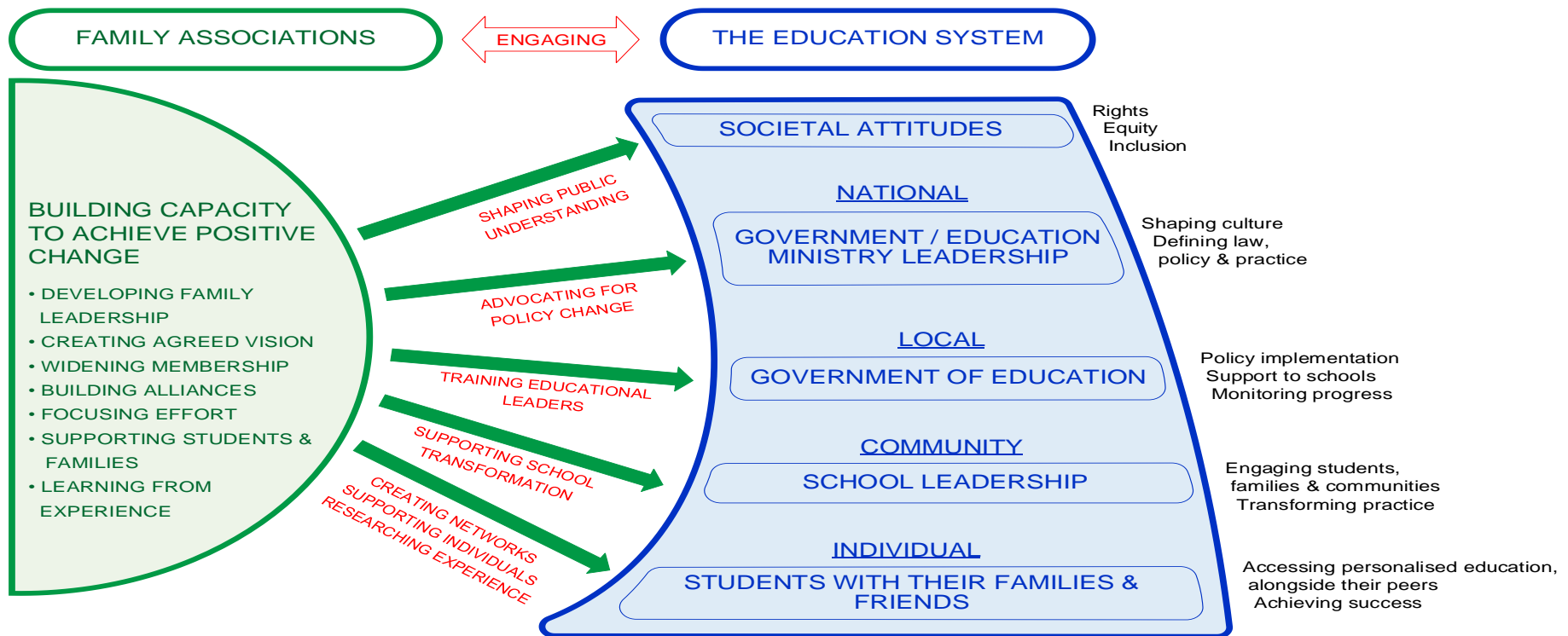
#### **Indicators: Classroom**

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.

## Engaging the whole system

As we have noted, even in small jurisdictions like the Canadian province of New Brunswick (**P1**), education is complex! Typically education systems, looking from the Ministry downwards, have multiple levels and increasing numbers of entities and participants as we reach the classroom level. This 'vertical' structure is shown diagrammatically on the right-hand side of **Diagram II** (drawn from **P4**) below. The specific tasks of leadership at each level of course vary according to the key functions exercised at this level. (**P1** provides more detailed lists of these tasks at the national, local and school levels summarised briefly on the right-hand side of this diagram.) However this is *one system*: actions at these different levels are inter-related. Throughout the system we need the same driving sense of purpose to promote coherent transformation.

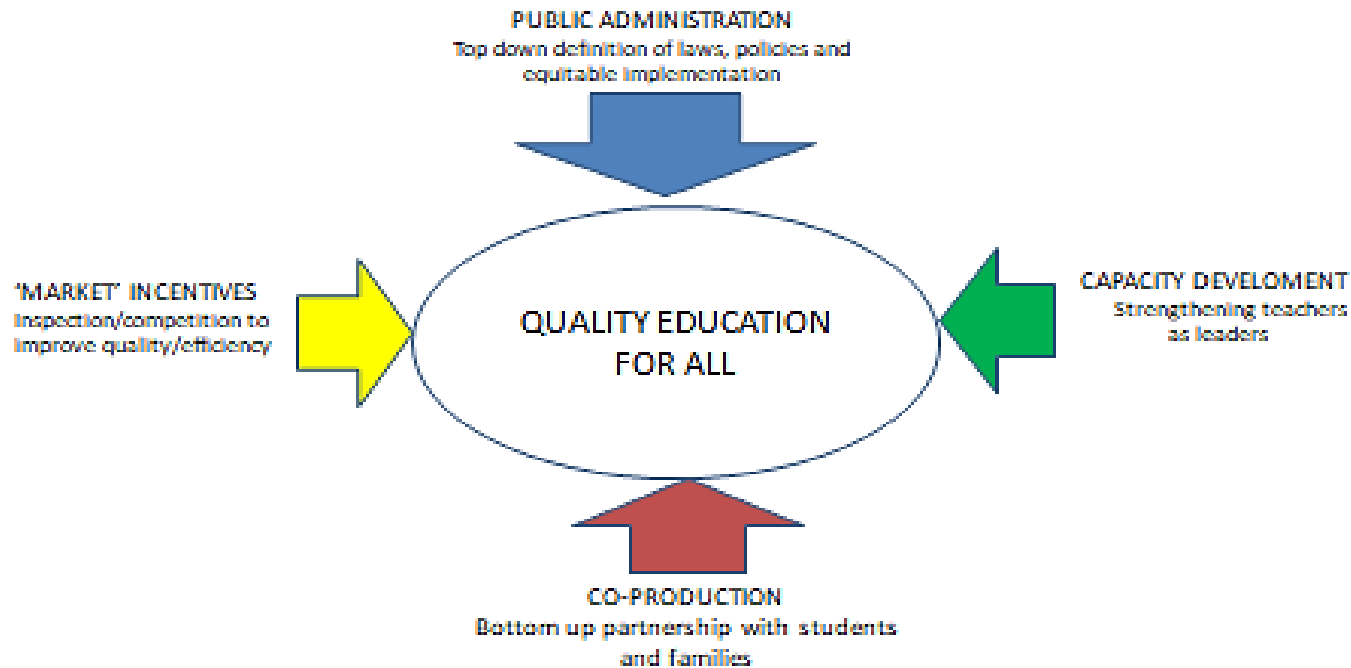
**Diagram II. MULTIPLE LEVELS AND ELEMENTS IN NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS**



## Using different levers for change

Another way of thinking about this complex system is to identify the different groups of stakeholders involved and the different ways in which power or influence can be mobilised. **Diagram III** offers a simple representation of these factors. Clearly the education system involves government with what we may describe as democratic authority exercised through traditional methods of public administration. It involves professional workers, notably teachers, whose contributions can be strengthened through investment in developing their motivation and skills. It involves students, families and through them, the communities of which they are a part - all of which can be seen as partners with schools and teachers in improving education from the 'bottom' upwards. And, especially but not only in the private sector, schools are exposed to market or quasi-market incentives (for example, independent school assessment, 'league tables', parental choice) that also influence educational provision.

**Diagram III. FOUR APPROACHES TO EDUCATION SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION**



We will explore aspects of these different levers of change in each of the sections that follow, starting with a consideration of what is sometimes described as 'co-production'.

### Partnering with students and families

'It takes a village to raise a child' is a wise African proverb. Schools and teachers need to engage students and families in the educational enterprise and, of course, much of what we learn comes from our experiences at home and in our local communities, not only in the classroom. As the Greek philosopher, Plutarch, expressed this 2000 years ago, 'Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel'. Students need to be active participants in their own learning and indeed a key source of mutual support to each other within diverse classrooms (as **P2** describes in much greater detail). Students are essential partners with other school leaders in building a culture in which everyone is welcome and participating fully.

Similarly, parents need to be involved with teachers in developing and delivering each child and young person's educational programme and parents will be helped in this if there is encouragement for parent-to-parent support. For all students, but especially those at risk of marginalisation, families are likely to be the most important advocates for their children in seeking inclusive, quality education. Accordingly families need good information about the rights of their children, the quality of schools and how best to speak up for necessary improvements.

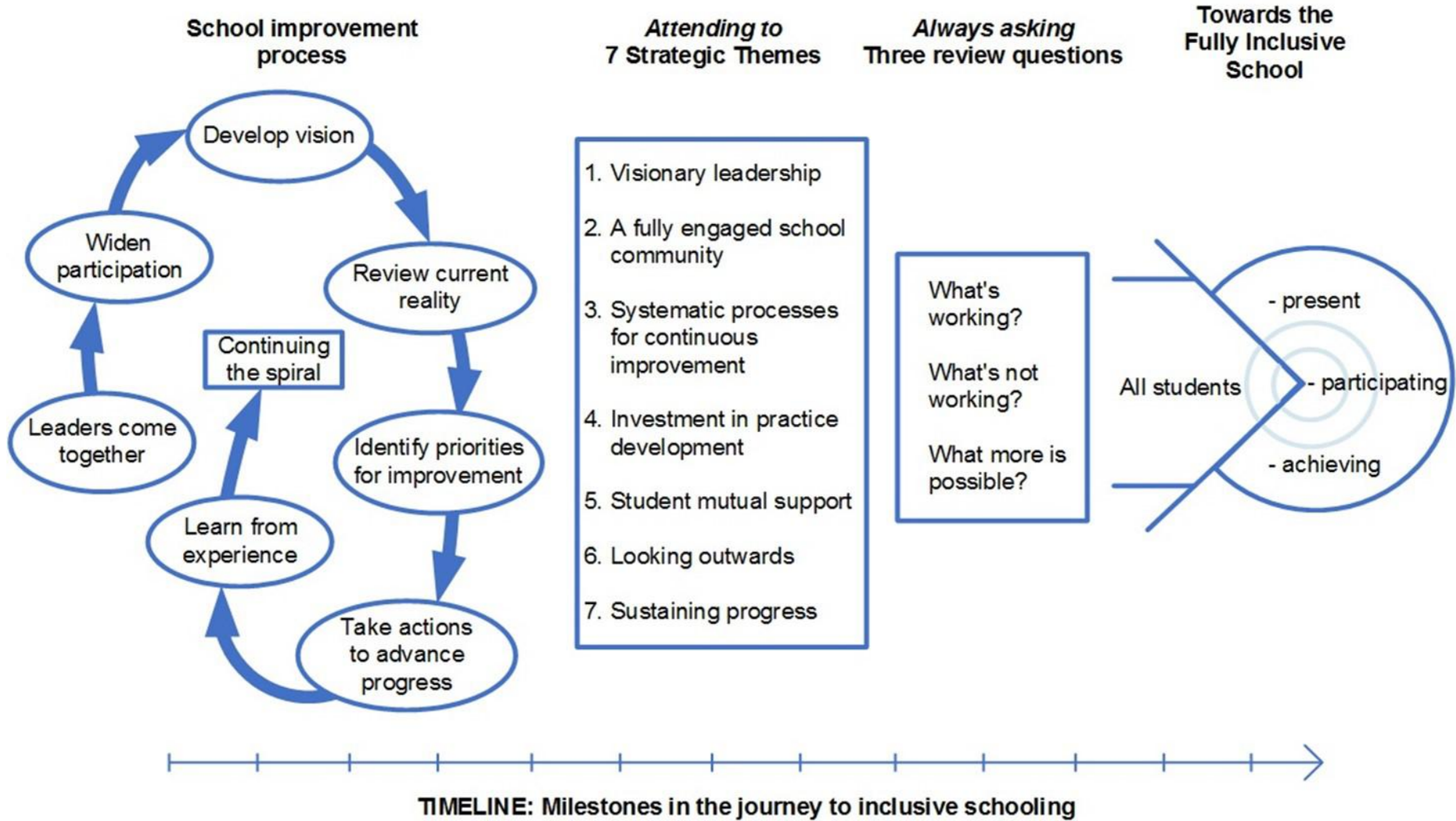
Our pamphlet, (**P4**), describes how informal family links have grown into local and national family associations able to mobilise this support and advocacy at all levels. Families need to be partners in policy-making. The left-hand side of **Diagram II** summarises what our examples from across the globe suggest about how these associations build their own capacity to achieve positive change and the range of functions (shaping public understanding, advocating for policy innovation, training educational leaders, advising schools, supporting individual families, etc.) through which this influence is exercised.

### Planning the journey towards transformation

How then is it possible to achieve fundamental change in these complex systems? At each of the levels (individual schools, local school districts and national ministry) there needs to be mutually referenced goal-directed improvement processes that involve relevant stakeholders in achieving sustainable action. Our pamphlet focused on schools, (**P2**), develops this idea in most detail as we suggest in **Diagram IV** that follows.



**Diagram IV. A MODEL FOR SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION**



Transformational change takes time. The journey, for example, to better schooling, requires a continuing process of planning, doing and learning (as represented by the spiral on the left-hand side of this diagram). (The school case studies in **P2** show that even at the level of the school this may take several years....and indeed there will always be scope for further improvement.) Moreover, these efforts need to engage with all seven of the main themes we are addressing here (formulated slightly differently in the central part of the diagram), always asking 'What's working?', 'What's not working?' and 'What more is possible?' in order to identify proposals for action. Importantly, proposed innovations need to be tested against their implications for delivering sustainable progress towards quality, inclusion and equity. Complex systems have a tendency to incorporate changes in ways that revert back to traditional practice: we need innovations that anticipate - and foster - a radically different future. And we need to integrate these innovations into 'the way things are always done round here' in order for them to become sustainable.

### Developing effective practice

Within this complexity, teachers and their classroom practice are fundamental: good teachers and effective instruction are essential to every student's success. Our third pamphlet (**P3**) looks in detail at what good teachers do, identifying seven common features of effective practice. Good teachers understand the purpose of education broadly and take responsibility for the education of all their students. They work in partnership with families to promote high expectations for all learners and attend continuously to their well-being. They need of course an in-depth understanding of their subject matter but also a similar understanding of each student. They consider carefully how to manage lessons, the way they use any additional teaching assistance and the adjustments they make to reflect individual differences among students. They set and assess achievable goals and use pedagogical strategies like universal design for learning, differentiated instruction and cooperative learning groups. And they require some of an actor's creative skills to ensure that every lesson is an engaging performance!

Developing effectiveness in all these aspects of practice requires three main kinds of investment. First, classrooms are embedded in school and schools are impacted by wider educational policies. Good schools (as we describe more fully in **P2**) provide direction and support for what teachers do, ensure that curricula are both relevant and flexible, tackle the barriers to full student participation, provide assistive technologies and varied learning materials, and demonstrate that they value teachers as leaders in their own classrooms.

Second, education systems invest in the recruitment and training of well-motivated and well-qualified teachers and good schools ensure that there are arrangements for continuous professional development, especially by making time available for teachers to reflect on their own experiences and share what they are learning with colleagues.

Third, the case studies (in **P2**) suggest the importance of establishing school-based support teams, bringing various kinds of expertise together as a resource to both the school's improvement plan and the work of classroom teachers aspiring to do better with all their students.

### Establishing education as a learning system

We have seen already here that in most jurisdictions, the education system as a whole is very complex, in terms of its scale, the number of levels between classroom and Ministry and the variety of participants. Moreover, advancing the goal expressed in SDG4 requires, over a period of years, a radical transformation, embracing, among other issues (as an important [paper](#) by Paula Hunt puts this): the requirement for a rights-based national legislative framework and related policies; mechanisms for translating policies into practice; equitable financing; a flexible curriculum that can be adapted for all students; similarly flexible assessment processes; teacher education and support; appropriate school access, culture and pedagogy; and investment in student empowerment, alongside family and community engagement.

Bridging this complexity in national strategies for sustainable change requires not only that education enables all students to learn and develop but also that the education system itself is able to learn and develop: that it becomes a *learning system*. Vertically, this means creating processes that enable leaders in different parts of the system to be able to see something of the 'whole', so that they can relate their contributions to the system-wide objectives. Laterally, just as students learn from other students and teachers learn from other teachers, we need to create processes that enable schools to learn from other schools and local school districts to learn from other school districts. Our first pamphlet (**P1**) illustrates how this was achieved in the Canadian province of New Brunswick. In this example, the province invested in regular independent reviews to provide feedback to Ministers and other participants about strengths and weaknesses in progress to date. The Ministry, working with school districts, also created multiple opportunities for all kinds of people to share insights and experience across lateral boundaries.

More widely, fairly recent innovations in the strategic change field have made available some variety of what (to quote the title of a book by B.B. Bunker and B.T. Alban, Jossey-Bass, 1997) are *Large Group Interventions* (concerned with) *Engaging the Whole*

*System for Rapid Change*. Among these we have ourselves used what are now the well-documented methods of *Appreciative Inquiry*, *Future Search*, *The World Café* and *Open Space Technology*. What these methods have in common is the creation of safe and inclusive 'spaces' within which people with different perspectives and experiences have support to reflect on successes and challenges and seek to identify actions designed to make a positive difference..

### **Implications for dispersed leadership**

This short guide is addressed to people taking on leadership roles in transforming education to meet the goal of SDG4. Transformational change requires leadership throughout the education system, at many levels and from people in many roles. So, policy-makers and teachers as well as parents and students.

Throughout this dispersed system such leadership requires:

- understanding the importance of radical change;
- working with others to develop a vision of a better future that inspires transformation and communicating this throughout the system;
- building trust, respecting what people 'bring to the table' from their own experience, standing alongside them and supporting their exploration and learning;
- encouraging a wide variety of innovations, small and large, to demonstrate the vision in practice;
- assisting innovators to build networks for sharing knowledge across schools and communities and celebrating successes;
- encouraging critical reflection on what is being learnt from these efforts;
- gradually consolidating progress into laws, policies and an inclusive culture in which all students are equally valued; and
- celebrating achievements and helping all those involved to sustain their vision and passion along this lengthy journey.

The many examples in our four pamphlets show that, despite the challenges, transformational change to achieve *quality education for all* is possible. We hope that this short guide will be a resource to action for leaders everywhere.

David Towell

david.towell@inclusivefutures.uk

Centre for Inclusive Futures

London, March 2022

\*The four pamphlets:

**P1 [Advancing Inclusive Education: Keys to transformational change in public education systems](#)**

[En español](#)

**P2 [The Journey To Inclusive Schooling; Advancing School Transformation From Within](#)**

[En español](#)

**P3 [Teachers As Leaders: Advancing Inclusive & Quality Education For All](#)**

[En español](#)

**P4 [Family Association Strategies For Achieving Transformational Change In Education: An overview of lessons from national experiences](#)**

[En español](#)