

Launch of innovative disability organisation at the British Council

IDEA (International Disability Equality Agency) – the new disability initiative based at the Centre for Social Action, De Montfort University – was formally launched at a meeting held at the British Council office in London on Wednesday June 4.

IDEA was created as a means whereby UK based disabled people with first hand knowledge of equality issues and training skills could work internationally with fellow disability organisations and individuals, supporting them in their struggles to improve their conditions and opportunities. It is currently working on projects in Russia, Bulgaria, Mozambique and Malta. Its founders and directors are Dr Bill Albert, Chair of the Norfolk Coalition of Disabled People, Mark Harrison, Director of the Centre for Social Action, Jacqui Christy James MBE, member, officer and trustee of a number of international and Welsh disability organisations and Michael Turner, writer and researcher on disability issues.

The event attracted many well connected supporters from the political, disability and voluntary sectors, including Baronesses Helena Kennedy and Rosalie Wilkins and Lords Judd, Dubs and Haskins from the House of Lords, disability campaigners Bev Ashton from Action on Disability and Development (ADD), William Bee from Disability Rights Commission (DRC), Helen Caplan and Andy Rickell from the British Council of Disabled People (BCODP), Rachel Hurst from Disability Awareness in Action and

other representatives from the British Council, DfID, the High Commission for Mozambique and a range of voluntary organisations.

Opening the launch, Human Rights campaigner Baroness Helena Kennedy, who is Chair of the British Council, described how she had heard about the new agency from Bill Albert and immediately wanted to offer support. She felt that it was highly appropriate for the British Council to be involved because of the connection between their values, emphasising mutual

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[Baroness Helena Kennedy and Jacqui Christy James](#)



Social Action: **a force for change in schools** **and communities in America**

The Centre for Social Action has been working in partnership with the National Writing Project based at the University of California, Berkeley since 1999. NWP is a professional development agency offering teachers in primary and secondary schools in 50 states, support and consultancy with the development of literacy programmes for young people.

From 2000-2002 Centre trainers Jennie Fleming and Ian Boulton ran training courses at the Summer Institutes organised by NWP, that introduced teachers from different States to the key principles and practice of social action. At subsequent workshops, teachers from around the United States involved in this work were able to meet with and learn from each other about implementing social action in their schools and classrooms

These sessions were well received by teachers who saw in them useful techniques for engaging with young people who were not connecting particularly well with their own education system. Some came back a second time to widen their knowledge of social action and three visited the UK to take part in the Centre's Social Action Summer School.

Many of the teachers started to implement social action within their own schools with some spectacular success. The following two accounts describe some of the activities undertaken by the young people.

Youth Dreamers

This account of the Youth Dreamers project combines the written contributions of Kristina Berdan, a teacher in a multi-age middle school classroom in Baltimore city and Chekana Reid and Cierra Cary who are members of the Youth Dreamers Group.

Kristina describes the origins and progress of the project as follows:

"The Youth Dreamers began in March 2001 as an elective course at the Stadium School called "Community Action." I decided to facilitate this course because I had done social action with students on the elementary level after school and was always amazed at the number of skills they learned in the process, not to mention the incredible motivation they had for projects that they owned. After attending the Centre for Social Action's Philadelphia training, I realized that I finally had the framework and some of the tools

necessary to do this kind of work during school hours.

Many students ended up joining the class because "I felt that the Youth Dreamers would be an organization where my voice would be heard and my opinion would be heard." During the first days of the course, I used social action activities to challenge the students to really think about and identify the issues in their community.

The Youth Dreamers have taken on a life of their own. As their teacher and guide, I have noted the skills and knowledge they have gained, the



The Youth Dreamers Group in action

confidence that has grown, the awareness of world issues that has developed and the incredible pride and ownership amongst all of them. I have learned to become a true facilitator, only offering guidance and organisation when they ask. I have struggled with other adults who do not take them seriously and expect me to do the work for them. They are often sceptical of what the students can do and are impatient for information. They don't understand that the project belongs to the students and students often need more time. Working with these students in this way has changed my philosophy of teaching. Working with adults who support them has made me appreciate the gifts and generosity of others. Working with the community has helped me open my eyes to the needs of others. What's next? The realisation of the dream..."

Chekana and Cierra describe their experiences of working to achieve their dream centre as follows:

"The Youth Dreamers are a group of students in grades seven through ten who decided that they wanted their voices to be heard. We are part of the Stadium School, a Baltimore City Public

School that serves about 115 students in grades four through eight from the communities surrounding Memorial Stadium. Back then, we met for one hour each day. Now, we meet every Wednesday as part of a full day project class, in the evenings, and on weekends.

Our mission and goal is to decrease the amount of violence that involves youth after school. We read that after school many kids just hang out and participate in unstructured activities. This leads to bad grades, bad attendance at school, drug abuse, and bad behavior. Our goal is to try to create a youth-run youth centre where these kids can go instead. Our centre will hopefully decrease the amount of negative acts that our youth are involved in today.

The Beginning

The first things we did to reach our dream were to write a pledge to show our commitment, a business proposal for possible funders, a one year operating costs budget and complete a letter writing campaign. We wrote over 40 letters and only received replies from three people. We did not stop, we kept on writing, and for those who did not hear us, we kept on fighting.

Fundraising and Grantwriting

Our first funding was from Youth As Resources. We requested \$3000 for furniture for our centre. To our surprise, we were then written into a federal bill by Senator Milkuski earmarking \$70,000 for the creation of our youth-run youth centre. She partnered us with St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center to help us buy the house and Habitat for Humanity to help us renovate the house. Since then we have written many other grant applications and now have over \$180,000 towards our one-year operating costs budget of \$276,000. Even though we were rejected from some of these foundations, we still kept writing and never gave up. We have also run many fundraising events.

All About the Centre

Our youth centre will be run by two adult directors, a Board of Directors that includes youth and adults, up to 23 teenagers in grades seven through twelve, at least eight adult volunteers from the community, Ameri-Corps volunteers, and a janitor. The teenagers will tutor members and teach a variety of classes along with adult volunteers. The centre will include a variety of classes, such as sewing, pottery, mosaics, art, cooking and typing, to name just a few.

Each teenager will commit to working at the centre a certain number of hours each week. They will be paid a small stipend for half of these hours and will earn service-learning hours for the other half. Adult volunteers will get paid a small stipend for their hours. The directors and janitor will get paid a set yearly salary. Finally, we are trying to set up a scholarship fund for Youth Dreamers who serve on the Board of Directors.

Not only will the youth centre serve youth in the community, but it will also serve community members. We will host block parties, open houses, neighbourhood clean-ups and other activities that bring youth and adults together in positive ways. We have been involved in many different publicity events.

This year, four of us went to area elementary schools during the day to work with our future members. We wrote letters to the principals to get permission, and then planned activities and lessons to do with the younger children. Working with younger children is hard, but it pays off in the end.

Four of us also worked with the Baltimore Community Foundation to review proposals for after school programming in Baltimore. This was a long and hard process, but it gave us a chance to see how proposals are viewed from the "other side." We also ran workshops for other middle school students from the city. We helped them identify problems in their community that they wanted to solve. We will continue to work with them to give them advice and help with their projects"

Student power

Faye Henderson

Teacher in a school in Idaho

Empowering under privileged sixth graders with strategies to change their lives without fighting has always been a desire of mine. I just had no clue how to do it. I went with an open mind to my first Centre for Social Action Institute, but on my return, I felt intimidated trying to integrate the social action principles among all the curricular requirements. I felt the need for more exposure in the social action theory. Consequently, when the opportunity presented itself, I applied to attend the Centre for Social Action Summer School in Europe. There I discovered that I was on the cutting edge of incorporating these principles into the classroom.

After the first Institute, I established community in my three classes using the Centre for Social Action Institute activities. I attempted to use the process to enable students to solve problems in their lives and community. Unfortunately, I would get off course because I wasn't good at

incorporating the lessons into the rest of the curriculum. I also was not narrowing my focus enough for the students. I needed to focus on one problem. Returning for a second time, gave me the opportunity to work with three other teachers and to learn ways to integrate the process within the curriculum. Seeing the theory in action in the lives of the other professionals such as nurses, social workers, and childcare workers, helped me to visualise ways to modify activities and create new ones. I modified the learning experience based on the cognitive abilities of my sixth graders.

The particular issue which came up were the problems my student were facing in their school schedule in having enough time to eat their midday meal.

Students were at the mutiny stage over the meagre thirty minutes they had to get their food, eat, empty trays, and clean their tables. Any delays from previous lesson affected how long they had to eat. The unfortunate thing about this situation was that neither teachers nor students had power to change the schedule. It had been carved in stone during the summer.

Consequently, the frustration mounted. Tempers flared. Students were tired of having to throw their lunch away with time to eat only a few bites. Discipline problems were not only occurring in the cafeteria but were beginning to overflow into the afternoon class.

I approached the assistant principal about the problem.

"Tough!" She snapped. "Life isn't fair. Tell them deal with it!"

Shocked at how unwilling she was to compromise or even attempt to find a solution, I returned to the classroom and explained the situation to the students. I tried various problem-solving techniques that were within our control but nothing worked.

Following these frustrating experiences I asked in

the classroom, "Do you really want to do something about this lunch situation?" "Yes!" they shouted. "I want you to write your feelings, thoughts, and possible solutions to this problem as a journal entry," I instructed. I needed time to think as well as diffuse the tempers. After a good night of sleep and reflective thinking, I relied upon my training in social action. When the students entered the classroom, I told them each group was going to make a film poster depicting all the problems in our school. "Use symbols, or pictures, to indicate the problems," I instructed. "When you have completed the poster, give it a title."

Since the classes were seventy minutes long, the students were able to finish the poster in one class session. My intention was to have different groups working on the different problems. The result was that every single group wanted a chance to solve the lunch situation. I gave them the opportunity.

It was agreed that the group needed to approach the principal to resolve the situation. While nobody wanted to approach her face to face, it was agreed that all the students should write her a letter. During a brainstorm session, possible solutions were listed on chart paper. Later, students decided which solutions to eliminate and which to keep.

Finally the day came when I presented the letters to the principal. "Mrs. H., the sixth graders feel that they are not getting enough eating time in the cafeteria," I said. "I don't expect you to answer every letter. However, I would appreciate it if you would speak to the whole class acknowledging their concerns and arriving at a possible solution if you will." The principal gave me a sceptical look as I handed her two hundred letters. Several days later, as the sixth graders entered the cafeteria, the principal addressed them all with the following comment.

"Mrs. Henderson's students have completed a persuasive writing project. I was presented with

two hundred well-written letters describing possible solutions to increase your eating time. Some are doable. Others are not."

She then outlined some solutions, including those suggested directly by the students, which would help make better use of the time available.

The students were delighted and understood that while individual interventions from teachers had not solved the problem, collective action from all of them had helped to change the situation – an outcome they dubbed "Student power". For the first time in months my students left smiling.

Fortunately, the Principal's changes did make a significant difference in time. The film poster had empowered the students with the tools and knowledge to make changes in their environment that were not within their control prior to the poster. It resulted in students suggesting other problems to tackle. Several sessions were spent addressing concerns at home and ways to

approach those problems. Some groups spent time addressing other problems within the school. This project had begun as a means to solve one problem. Its results were so much more.

I had been empowered as a teacher because I was able to give a simple theory to my students that enabled them to make change in their lives. Moreover, and more importantly, my students and I gained a new respect for one another. Our perspectives had changed and we saw each other as on the same team rather than teacher versus students, or authority versus students. The students began voicing opinions more openly and I began to listen and make changes in lesson plans. Likewise, some of the other teachers began to listen and heed suggestions of the students. Thus, my classroom became more conducive to learning.

Working for disability rights in Mozambique

The IDEA consultants Jacqui Christy James and Mark Harrison were no doubt humming the 1976 Bob Dylan song which starts "I'd like to spend some time in Mozambique", before flying off to spend three weeks there running capacity releasing training courses for representatives of a wide range of disability organisations in the country.

This was funded by the development organisation POWER (Prosthetic and Orthotic Worldwide Education and Relief) which provides mobility devices for disabled people in need in the country. The long-term goal of this project is to improve the access by disabled people in Mozambique to healthcare and other services

available to non-disabled people and simultaneously to promote greater participation in civil society.

IDEA was commissioned to contribute to the capacity releasing process through providing three 5 day courses combining disability equality and social action themes. The intention of the work is that Mozambican partners will, at the end of the process, have the tools and capacity to identify key issues, analyse them to determine solutions and draw up and implement action plans to address the issues.

The training took place in three different regions – Nampula, Beira and Maputo – to ensure that access to this resource was distributed throughout the country and not just restricted to the capital.

The first part of the course was group formation, bringing participants together and getting them to share experiences and common problems. They

were introduced to different concepts of disability – medical/traditional models and the social model. They examined how disabled people and organisations are treated in Mozambique and how these experiences differ because of age, gender, impairment, area, region, city, town and rural area. The causes of these issues were next examined and one issue was prioritised and developed through an action planning process to be worked on for the rest of the training course.

The first stop was Nampula where some of the participants came from the far north. They started as individuals learning alongside others, but through the group process they soon understood the strength of working collectively across their organisational and disability groups. The difficulties in this group in particular were around the facilitation of deaf people from different regions as there were only two signers. They eventually worked together to look at the problems and possible solutions to deaf people's difficulties in the whole of Mozambique. The second week was held in Beira and included attendance from non-disabled people from the Ministry of Social Action and the Director from the Ministry of Education who worked with disabled people. The third week in Maputo attracted fewer participants than the others but they were equally committed. In all three regions,

disabled women were under represented in the groups, an issue compounded by culture and tradition.

The themes of the action plans included:

- Disabled children and their rights to social services and education
- Improving the work of disabled organisations
- A plan of action to tackle HIV/AIDS
- Equal access for disabled children
- Tackling the lack of integration of disabled people

Comments from the participants on the value of the training included:

“all parts of the course were important because I got to know the various ways of solving problems and dealing with difficulties within our organisation.”

“demonstration of how the plans are made and how to implement them, how to create partnerships, how to identify problems and how to solve them, demanding that the rights of disabled people are respected.”

UK Mozambican Study Tour

As part of the EU funded programme, two young disabled men, Manuel and Jose took part in a two week study tour, organised and facilitated by IDEA. The visit took place during 21 June – 5



Mark Harrison and Jacqui Christy James with Mozambican friends

July. They spent the first week in the Midlands, North West and London, travelling to Wales to attend a conference in the second week.

The priority was to look at services run by and for disabled people. The aim was not to copy what was happening here, but to look critically at how things might be improved in Mozambique for disabled people, by disabled people organising things for themselves. The areas of particular interest were disabled student services, disability sport and youth provision. Manuel and Jose were not just observers as they participated in two wheelchair basketball training sessions with Leicester Cobras and went sailing with Mosaic. They also participated in the Greater Manchester

Coalition of Disabled People's (GMCDP) Young Disabled People's Forum meeting.

On Saturday they met up with a delegation of disabled people from Bulgaria who were also taking part in a study tour organised by IDEA, before heading off to Wales. The second week was spent between attending a young disabled people's conference – Rights into Action – and study visits to Welsh organisations.

On returning to Mozambique Manuel and Jose were going to share their experiences with other disabled organisations, as well as implementing their own action plans with their colleagues in their groups. ■

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respect and connections between different people and the disability rights and empowerment values of IDEA. The British Council were already sponsoring the international disability congress in Swansea and supporting training initiatives but they needed to become more sensitive to these issues and start to address them.

Lord Frank Judd remembered when director of Oxfam, on a visit to central America, being told by the Bishop of Mexico that while Oxfam talked a lot about equality, his people were not there to act as objects to fulfill their institutional needs. Instead, solidarity is the real meaning of charity.

Jacqui Christy James, on behalf of IDEA, described how the organisation had originated and emphasised that it was not about cultural imperialism but sharing knowledge and experiences with disabled people in other countries. Too often, organisations claiming to

work with the disabled did not approach the work from a disability rights perspective and did everything for people. "They don't help us develop ourselves," she said, "we can organise and control our own lives."

She described how disabled people from Mozambique, who were potential leaders, would have the opportunity to come over to Britain to meet with others at the June "Rights into Action" International Young Disabled People's Conference in Swansea. She also felt personally committed to the disabled people living on the 14th floor of their accommodation block in Samara in Russia, who had to bump their wheel chairs up so many stairs, but still somehow got themselves to the project meetings and were responding to the ideas and opportunities opening up for them. The message, originally spearheaded by Disabled Peoples International, was spreading worldwide that disabled people could advocate for themselves. ■

Braille, speech and large print versions of this newsletter are available upon request

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