



What contribution can creativity and creative learning make to social inclusion?

Mike Cockett

CapeUK Creativity Matters

Creativity is an essential human attribute which should lie at the heart of learning.

The ability to face uncertainty and respond to complex challenges with energy, enthusiasm, imagination and resourcefulness has never been more important. We believe that children and young people have a right to experience and develop their own creativity – becoming proactive, creative players in the world.

Through the ‘Creativity Matters’ series we are hoping to stimulate a conversation about how we can transform the experiences which children and young people have in their schools and communities to make this right a reality.

We want to open up a discussion about some key questions which have emerged from our work in promoting creative teaching and learning. All of the issues will draw on CapeUK’s experience in this field. Some of the issues will be provocative - challenging prevailing assumptions; others will raise questions in a more tentative way. However, all are intended as a stimulus to further debate and discussion in order to grow our understanding of children and young people, learning and creativity.

If you would like to carry on the conversation please contact us at: creativitymatters@capeuk.org

**What contribution
can creativity and
creative learning make
to social inclusion?**

Conversation with Ray 1

PE Teacher: **Come on Ray. You're in this race.**

Ray: **Nah.**

PE Teacher: **Why not?**

Ray: **You just want someone to come last.**

Notes & Remarks

Jot down your thoughts in the margin here...

Impressive claims are being made for creativity and creative learning as a means of preventing exclusion and re-engaging the excluded. This pamphlet argues that the picture is more complex and suggests possibilities and directions for further work in this area.

You seldom saw Alan without his anorak, usually with the hood up hiding his face. His behaviour would be familiar to anybody dealing with young people who are seen as disruptive and disaffected in schools. His achievements were minimal, but he was just outside the group that would be stated as having special needs. His attendance was extremely erratic and he engaged in low-level disruptive activities in class, often simply not doing what he was asked to do or doing it so slowly that teachers became exasperated. Occasionally, his behaviour would become even more disruptive and by year 11 he was on the brink of being excluded. That was when

he was recommended for one of the early CapeUK programmes. With a group of his peers he began a programme based partly in school and partly in a local youth centre aimed at avoiding final exclusion, with the hope that the young people would eventually manage to complete at least some of their GCSE courses. They worked with a teacher from the school, a youth worker and a number of creative partners, one of whom was a photographer. For his part of the programme the photographer gave each of the group a disposable stills camera and the task of working in pairs to take a series of pictures of themselves which would add up to a self portrait. He assisted with advice on how to take effective photos and later on how to produce a display of their work. The young people were given the option of making an exhibition of their work to display in school and all of them agreed. The exhibition aroused a lot of interest and the project was counted a success.

Alan produced a series of images showing himself, first entirely hidden in his anorak hood and then gradually revealing his face until in the final image he was looking straight at the camera. This portrait is remarkable, both in what he chose to show about himself, but also in that it has become a sort of symbol of what can happen to young people in difficulties offered the chance of engaging in creative activities. In real life too he slowly emerged from the anorak cocoon into which he had sealed himself as a way of dealing with the problems that school and life in general had dealt him. He formed marginally better relationships with his peers and with adults; he managed to avoid being excluded and he was entered for some GCSEs. It wasn't exactly a butterfly emerging, but it was something. It is a story that can be repeated many times. CapeUK has a fund of them, as have other organisations and individuals involved in similar work.

The last we heard of Alan, he had left school; he had not gone to college; he was unemployed, but he was still active in the youth group and had become their unofficial cameraman both with stills and video cameras. In other words he still had a fingertip grip on entry into the adult world.

Alan's life has not been transformed as we might like it to have been, but the project has been at least partially successful.

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Who are the excluded and **can creative activities help** them?

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“All happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

Leo Tolstoy

Social exclusion is not a single phenomenon. Indeed, to paraphrase Tolstoy, the included resemble one another, but the excluded are each excluded in their own way. The roots of exclusion are many and varied - poverty, special needs of all kinds, personal and family origin and history, low educational attainment, peer group relationships, the impact of racism and so on. Social exclusion is seldom rooted in a single one of these. It is most often a result of a complex combination of factors, which can be infinitely varied. Poverty is the single clearest indicator, but even amongst the poorest only a minority would be considered 'excluded' at least in an educational sense. The government uses free school meals as an indicator of deprivation, but most pupils on free school meals are not considered to be

excluded nor is the excluded group made up entirely of those on free school meals.

For the purposes of this article social exclusion is treated as a portmanteau term to cover a range of circumstances in which young people find themselves. At one end of the range are those who are temporarily or permanently excluded from school. At the other end are those who, whilst they might be physically present, are unable to benefit from the educational opportunities on offer. It includes those who absent themselves from individual lessons or for whole days or weeks. It covers those displaying persistent anti-social behaviour and those who try to make themselves invisible. Recently there has been a focus on underachievement in specific ethnic groups and, in spite of improvements, ethnicity is still one of the factors behind the social exclusion of some individuals.

Evidence suggests that a focus on creativity and creative learning can have a positive effect across the range. However, there is a correlation between the severity and complexity of the problems faced by the young people and their schools and the extent of the investment and time needed to overcome it. A one-day artist-in-schools event will not turn round those severely disaffected with school, but a long term commitment to high status creative projects has been shown to have significant effects.

The following examples illustrate the positive effects but this is no magic wand. They may open some doors to a more positive future but other life events can easily close them again.

The NFER evaluation of the implementation of the initial CapeUK programme (NFER 2001) offers evidence of the positive impact of longer term programmes. They quote one CapeUK coordinator.

“[A boy] was involved in two years of projects. He’s just so much more vocal now. He didn’t have a voice. He’d never even dare, even think, that he was being asked. So, that’s really improved. They like working with professionals. They like different people coming in.”

They quote a student on a CapeUK 'Learning Gateway' project in Leeds. (a programme for young people who are not in employment or training post 16)

“Six months ago I wasn’t even expecting to be here. And when I first started I didn’t expect it would last either. But I have gradually grown to love it and stuck at it. Because of my problems, I didn’t expect to stick at it and I wouldn’t expect it when I was on

drugs and that. But as soon as I got myself sorted out after my mum leaving and that, I have gradually got the motivation to come here, because I wanted to prove to my mum that I aren’t a waster and that I want to make something of my life.”

A learning mentor who was also an experienced dancer and dance teacher worked with some of the most challenging young people in a high school. They decided to produce a version of Cinderella. None of her colleagues believed she would get it to work. The group included young people who had very fragmented and difficult personal circumstances. They had a record of dropping out of class and never following anything through. However, the involvement in a creative programme with a very public outcome completely captured their imagination and commitment. In the end, the project was left unfinished. The fragmented lives of the young people had not been healed - one literally had a broken leg, another was in prison, another permanently excluded from school and

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another had been reunited with his mother in another city. The learning mentor still defended the project. For a time, at least, they were engaged. Perhaps the memory of this would serve them well in the future.

Alan, our boy in the anorak, continued to hang on to school life, but by any measure he was a severe case. He was poor, he had an unstable family life, he had always been a low achiever at school and he had problems in forming relationships with both adults and peers. Through the creative programme he began to lift the hood from his face and engage more positively with the world around him. It may have been the new start he needed, but we can't guarantee it.

The tentative and limited nature of these claims for success with these students, even after extended periods of work, is a counter to over enthusiastic or uncritical claims for the transforming effects of creative activities. But the effects are real and we can legitimately ask the question: What else could work so well?

What else has been tried?

There are fashions and cycles in alternative programmes for the disaffected. Often, work related programmes are seen as the solution.

Inspection reports in the 1890s recommended practical work related programmes for those dropping out of, or alienated from schools. This approach has been heavily invested in over the years and has typically, more or less failed. The many policies and initiatives have included Hadow (1926) The Education of the Adolescent, then the 1944 Education Act, establishing the tripartite system leading to secondary modern schools and Half Our Future (DES 1963), which prepared the way for the raising of the school leaving age to 16, the Lower Attaining Pupils Project, the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative and most recently the ill-fated Tomlinson report followed by a White Paper that proposes a half-hearted attempt to boost the value of vocational qualifications whilst retaining the historic academic-vocational divide.

However much these programmes might apparently have benefited those involved, the core problems have not been solved, hence the next round of hand wringing about school drop out, truancy rates and poor achievement in 16+ examinations, and complaints, especially from employers, about low standards in basic skills. Action on basic skills is a favourite and repeated response. Access to continuing education and training and eventually to work is conditional on being able to read, write and manipulate numbers. No one disputes this, but programmes which focus on

basic skills alone fail to engage the disengaged. (We are concerned with school level programmes here: there is some evidence that employer based programmes for adults do benefit individuals and even possibly raise productivity.) So, the problem is not just how to teach basic skills to low achievers, but how to re-engage the disengaged in the process of learning in general.

Creative programmes are engaging and there is growing evidence that this is the case. There is even some evidence from America that those involved in out-of-school creative activities begin to improve their school test scores in basic skills (Shirley Brice Heath and Elizabeth Soep 1998). The 36 Creative Partnerships areas were chosen because they were areas suffering multiple deprivation. The rationale was that engagement in creative programmes would help overcome at least some of the effects of that deprivation. The philosophy of Creative Partnerships specifically states that they set out to achieve more than can be achieved through merely focussing on the three Rs.

One school project targeted, supported by CapeUK, mainly African Caribbean young people because of their relative underperformance in the school.

A technician in the school was a graphic designer and it was decided that the aim of the work would be to support the young people to make books about their lives. They worked with the learning mentor and the technician and were encouraged to collect images of what was important in their lives. They then designed and produced high quality books about themselves. What was remarkable about the programme was the apparent scale of the impact of a relatively small intervention. The head teacher reported that the project had had a powerful impact on the attendance of the group. One pupil, who had almost never attended previously, now came to school nearly all the time. The learning mentor found that the process had led to a positive change in her relationship with the young people. Previously, relationships had been based on problems so the young people only approached the learning mentor when they were either in trouble or they needed help. Collaborating on a process which was positive, creative and successful, shifted this relationship onto a more positive footing.

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Is **raising self-esteem** a good thing?

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Conversation with Ray 2

Ray I'm not doing that

Miss Why not?

Ray Last time I tried anything you said it was rubbish.

Miss No I didn't?

Ray Yes you did. You said 'good effort'. I know what that means.

One common argument for creative activities as a means of overcoming various levels of social exclusion is that they raise the self-esteem of the young people involved and this is seen to be an important means by which they can be reintegrated into mainstream learning. But there is no simple equation linking high self-esteem to conformity, inclusion and school achievement. An examination of

some of the complexities around the notion of self-esteem illustrates why we should be wary of simple linear connections.

Self-esteem - some of the complexities

Lack of self-esteem is not a single phenomenon - indeed there is no single definition. In its most extreme form it shows itself as a complete lack of belief that the individual is capable of doing anything to improve his or her lot. They feel powerless. They cannot see the point of making an effort. There will be multiple factors involved including a lack of perceived ability in many areas, challenging home and life circumstances, the experience of those close to them, personality, difficulty in forming effective relationships and lack of achievement in culturally high status activities. Lack of self-esteem is not often as all embracing as this, and the term is often applied to pupils who don't believe that they are any good at school work even though they might have high self-esteem or confidence in other aspects of their lives.

A large number of studies have been conducted in America seeking to justify the claim that raising self-esteem leads to improved engagement and achievement in schoolwork. Few, if any, find such a causal link. For example, Baumeister et al (2005) could find no link between higher self-esteem and either a reduction in delinquent behaviour or improved academic performance. They did find that there was a correlation between self-esteem and happiness but “causation needs to be established”. We have, as usual, to be careful about importing US data and applying it to this country. In particular the US studies relate to self-esteem programmes which concentrate on giving positive feedback almost whatever the circumstances, praise detached from actual achievement. However, there is enough to make us pause. One study of bullying, for example, found that bullies, far from having low self-esteem as was assumed, often had very high self-esteem and another that artificially raising self-esteem could lead to violence.

Maintaining self-esteem

We all put a lot of effort into maintaining self-esteem. What we call self-esteem is often our perception of our esteem in the eyes of others. This leads to behaviour which avoids failure and boosts acceptability. Consequently pupils will not engage in schoolwork so that their explanation for their failure can be that they

simply didn't do the work rather than that they lacked the ability to do it. Others will attribute lack of achievement to external factors, which are seen to be entirely out of their control. At the extreme this leads to behaviour which one researcher called “learned helplessness”.

The peer group can reinforce these effects. The consequence of this complex of emotion and motivation is that activities aimed at boosting self-esteem by encouraging engagement with teachers and school activities can be seen as a threat to self-esteem gained by lack of engagement with school and conferred by peers.

Conversation with Ray 3

- Counsellor** You're excluded for bullying Tommy.
- Ray** Yeh.
- Counsellor** I thought Tommy was one of your mates.
- Ray** He's a nerd.
- Counsellor** What makes him a nerd?
- Ray** He started doing his homework.
- Counsellor** If he stopped doing his homework...

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Notes & Remarks**Conversation with Ray 3 continued**

Counsellor ...would he stop being a nerd?

Ray Nah. Once a nerd always a nerd. You've got to be careful.

In one school, that operated a policy of streaming pupils for all subjects, the bottom year 8 stream contained the usual mixture of pupils with learning difficulties and pupils whose attainment was low because of bad behaviour. They were offered a programme of creative activities supported by a visual artist and two teaching assistants as well as their normal teacher. Even with this heavy investment, outcomes were mixed. Some pupils did engage with the activities but they were the quieter ones. The majority spent most of their time watching and showing off to each other. They competed in displaying challenging behaviour led by Jason, who had a particularly turbulent home life and was regularly suspended from school. They could not let go of that behaviour even when interested in the offered activity.

Here is another story. Shamira went to an all girls' school, which was lifting itself out of a cycle of low expectations and low achievement. She bought into the new regime and she worked hard for her GCSEs. She believed that she needed to "pass" her GCSEs by getting grade Cs and that to do that all she had to do was to work hard. This was the message from the school. She worked hard and got a string of grade Ds. She found that her ambitions for her post 16 career were all blocked. She was enrolled on a level 2 vocational course for which she was qualified, but the focus on grade C as a GCSE pass grade meant that she felt she had failed. For her the near misses counted for nothing. Because she had worked hard she had to attribute her lack of success to her lack of ability. Her self-esteem plummeted.

It could be argued that those at most risk of losing self-esteem are not those who have rejected academic or school achievement as a marker but those who have accepted it but are likely to miss the grades they need: those getting grade D when they hoped for grade C, those who worked hard for and got level 3 when they know that level 4 is the expected standard. If this is true, what are the implications for professionals working with these young people?

Conversation with Ray 4

Ray Snatching Tommy's homework book.
Let's see what it says.

Tommy Give it back.

Ray Reading with difficulty.
Well done Tommy. This is a great improvement. Keep up the good work.

Other kids laugh.

Tommy You're just jealous.

Ray Looking round for support.
The thing is Tommy, you might be teacher's pet in the classroom now but out here we're still in charge.

Tommy I've got my mates.

Ray Looking round
Where are they Tommy?

Throws book back at him.

Other kids laugh.

A sense of control

The reason why raised self-esteem is constantly referred to as an outcome of creative programmes is that the children and young people consistently report on how good it makes them feel. They talk about a sense of achievement, and how they had to overcome

their fears of doing something, but how good they felt once they did. They talk about how much they liked the praise they got for their efforts. They talk about feeling more confident. This looks like raised self-esteem. The key question is where does it come from?

A lot of what is often called raising self-esteem would be better described as the confidence which comes from gaining control, which is a natural consequence of controlled risk taking when a significant proportion of the risks pay off. A large proportion of those who lack self-esteem in educational settings are those for whom the risks of committing themselves to school learning have not paid off.

Creative activities offer an alternative route - one in which there are risks but where success can come in a variety of forms without easy rankings or age related standards. One essential characteristic of creative programmes is that they put aspects of learning in the control of the learner. You can't be creative by sitting back and letting someone else do it for you. To be inventive, to experiment, to cooperate with others, to have a purpose which you are pursuing requires a personal commitment. For those excluded or at risk of exclusion this is a risk in at least two ways. They risk losing peer esteem because they are cooperating and they risk failure in the creative activity itself. They have to put themselves on the line.

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Ray Feet up on desk

What's the point of doing this, miss?

Miss You've got to get a good mark in English if you want a job.

Ray Amazed

You think I could get a good mark?

Miss If you work hard.

Ray You promise me a job, if I get a good mark?

Miss Nothing's guaranteed.

Ray What's the point of trying then?

Risk taking

There is some evidence (Shirley Brice Heath again) that when pupils engage in creative activities it can boost their confidence and, in the longer term, improve the school performance of pupils. This contrasts with the results from programmes which have specifically aimed to raise self-esteem (as reported above). The reason seems to be the risk taking involved. Far from directly aiming to boost self-esteem the creative programmes, which have most effect on the excluded, actually demand that they put their self-esteem at risk. They can be persuaded to do it because the activities have high status and do not invite direct comparison with mainstream educational achievement, because they are outside the norms of school work.

For Alan, some of the status of the activity probably came from the fact that the programme took place partly out of school. The kudos of the final exhibition, the care with which the exhibition was mounted and the feedback from pupils, teachers and other adults also helped. The important thing is that in the end he did put his images up for others to see when his previous way of dealing with the educational world had been to hide his face. He could have been laughed at. He risked losing face with his mates.

Shamira, by contrast, tried to take what she had been convinced was the low risk option, doing what she was told and working hard. It didn't pay off.

Status

Higher status in an alternative setting is a two edged sword. It derives from being outside the norms of school, but the fact is that educational status ultimately depends on school-defined success. Mounting an exhibition of art work counts if it leads to a GCSE grade, and a relatively high one at that, and progress depends on achievement in basic skills which are not necessarily seen to be developed through programmes which emphasise creativity. Alternative courses suffer because their status is linked to the status of those on the courses and they suffer because ultimately even those on the courses recognise that they will not progress unless they achieve in mainstream as well as, or as opposed to, alternative programmes.

So there is an unresolved conflict here.

Disaffected young people can be engaged and persuaded to participate through creative activities, which confer on them an alternative status, but that status is not valued in the mainstream educational world.

The real challenge is to seek some equilibrium between the alternative and the mainstream and this must involve rethinking what we believe the mainstream should be.

A group of year 10 students on an alternative curriculum programme were asked at the end of the first year what they would like to be included in the following year's programme. Somewhat to the surprise of the staff involved, a significant number asked for more Maths and English. In discussion it became apparent that, whilst they still felt vulnerable when faced with traditional Maths and English lessons, they recognised that to get on they would have to join the mainstream particularly in those subjects.

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Why not **start early**?

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Conversation with Ray 6

Dad Reading son's report

It says here you don't work hard enough.

Ray **Nah.**

Dad **Why not?**

Ray **Working is for chumps.**

Dad **You're right son. It never did me any good.**

Mum Muttering

Talk about chip off the old block!

Shamira and Alan represent contrasting responses to lack of achievement. Shamira bought into the system and it let her down. Alan took Ray's dad's route and didn't so much drop out as drift away. We are not, of course, aware of their longer-term experiences and achievements but we cannot ignore their medium-term situation.

Alan was placed on his programme when he was in year 11. It was not that the school had not made efforts to help him before, but all the efforts had been aimed at keeping him in the mainstream classroom and he was coping less and less with what is defined as the "normal". It would have been much better if things had not been allowed to get so bad.

Is there evidence that an emphasis on creativity leads to an inclusive curriculum?

As with so much else in this field, the answer to this question rests with an accumulation of anecdotes rather than with any systematic study. We do not have the equivalent of Shirley Brice Heath's ten year study of the effects of out-of-school programmes on school achievement. The positive stories, however, should lead to a demand for such a study. Here is a sample.

One secondary school in Greater Manchester, high on poverty factors and low in the league tables, decided to take the creativity route. Their aim was to become a Performing Arts College, but in preparation they worked with CapeUK to promote the notion of creative learning across the curriculum. Pilot programmes were run in Science,

Mathematics, English, PE, History and Geography, as well as in the arts subjects. The school successfully gained Performing Arts College status and in the process the number of pupils gaining five good GCSEs rose from 21% to 45% over three years. Significantly this was not due to a change in the ability of the intake. Although all the problems of exclusion were not solved by these changes, certainly the boundary shifted significantly.

A primary school in East London had had a particularly difficult year 6 group. They performed better in the Key Stage 2 SATs than expected but this was still badly enough for serious concern. It had been known for some time that the year group was likely to perform badly in the tests and they had been subjected to a fairly heavy routine of revision and practice which did raise standards a little but left them dull and unhappy. The school policy is to teach through the arts and creativity and the low achievement

of the year group threatened this policy. A radical decision was made to offer an alternative programme to the next group of pupils coming through and their parents. The pupils would be supplied with the resources to do much of the basic numeracy and literacy work at home. Their progress would be regularly assessed but in return the school would continue with a rich programme of creative activities, research based projects, visiting artists and outings. The pupils accepted the offer and, both school and pupils stuck to their part of the deal. The school is careful to point out that this year group would have produced better results anyway because they had been a higher achieving group all through. However, the improvement was greater than could be ascribed to the normal variation between year groups. The school now figures in the top ten achieving schools in the borough. They out-perform schools with similar intakes in the area even though they take in pupils excluded from other schools. Most importantly, with few exceptions, the children and their teachers are happy at school.

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Of course we are still locked into measuring success in terms of scores, levels and grades in tests and examinations, which, as we have seen, can be a big part of the problem. We don't exactly know what the mechanism, is but accumulated anecdotal evidence suggests that creative activities give pupils something else to live for. They have an intrinsic value both in the process and the outcomes and that mitigates the negative effect of any lower levels and grades. They allow them to take risks, to take on a variety of roles and responsibilities and to be constructively critical of their own work and the work of a team.

Both Alan and Shamira would have benefited from having something else to live for and from being engaged in activities with intrinsic values for them from an early age. To be most effective, social inclusion programmes should not be remedial. They should stop the situation arising in the first place. Because of the complexity of the problems we should not expect any particular solution to solve them all, but we can, at least, address the difficulties presented by a curriculum and pedagogy which exclude a significant proportion of those they are supposed to benefit. It is not a matter of finding alternatives to the mainstream for those who have already been excluded, but of changing the mainstream.

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Conversations with Ray I first met a Ray in the 1960s when a huge fifteen year old used to barge into my classroom, lean back in his chair, clump his bowler boots on the desk and challenge me to try and teach him anything. I failed. Since then there have been many other Rays and Rayettes taught by myself and others. Many had more success than I did in persuading them to engage in some sort of productive work. This Ray is a fiction but all the conversations are true.

Mike Cockett

Summary

There is already a considerable body of evidence to show that engagement in creative activities can boost confidence and motivate young people to engage in learning, provided some or all of the following conditions are met:

- The activity has high status with the young people leading to outcomes they value in their own right
- It allows students to escape their disaffected identities (NFER)
- It gives a voice to young people and takes their views seriously (NFER)
- It involves a controlled level of personal risk taking (Shirley Brice Heath)
- It involves developing skills and knowledge which have high status with the young people
- Success is not described entirely in terms of the norms of school achievement
- It involves an increasing degree of control by the young people
- Sometimes it takes place outside the normal school environment
- Sometimes it involves working with adults who are not teachers but who have desirable skills and knowledge

- It is sustained over a significant period of time
- The effort and investment are proportional to the severity of the problems faced
- Finally, and most importantly, it should start before a chronic problem develops.

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About CapeUK

CapeUK is an incubator for the development of ideas and practice in creativity and learning. A research and development agency our focus is children and young people and those organisations and individuals who work with them.

We are both a research and a practical organisation - our approaches are firmly rooted in experience.

- We try out ideas
- We make meaning
- We support change processes
- We influence policy and strategy

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