

# ON DIVERSITY

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*An Essay Collection*

October 2020



**New  
Schools  
Network**

  
**Confederation  
of School Trusts**

# PREFACE

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## **2020 has been a year like no other. The coronavirus pandemic has shaken our lives at every turn.**

At the same time, organisations have been awoken to social change movements, particularly following the tragic killing of George Floyd in the United States and the subsequent wave of protests across the world.

It has been a time to pause, to take stock, and to think critically about our own role in promoting diversity in a sincere way.

New Schools Network (NSN) and the Confederation of School Trusts (CST) are committed to work that will take us from promoting diversity to playing an active role in growing a pipeline of diverse future leaders. To do so effectively, we are working with a range of stakeholders to ensure meaningful, long-lasting interventions.

This is the first in a series on diversity produced by NSN and the CST. It celebrates six trustees from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, who reflect on their lives and experiences, and what the education sector needs to do to improve diversity.

We are grateful to Matthew Syed for his introduction for this piece, adapted from his work in Rebel Ideas. His messages are clear. Diversity is not just a tick box exercise. It will not be achieved through a diversity statement on a website. It does not mean just respecting or appreciating different viewpoints, it is embracing the value of diversity as a culture.

This process starts from the top, from the trust board.

It is therefore a privilege to be able to share with you this timely collection of essays exploring the importance of diversity and inclusion on boards of academy trusts in England.

Reading this, we hope you will be inspired, humbled, and optimistic that pupils across the country will increasingly see themselves reflected in school communities enriched by different faiths, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Undoubtedly, there is a very long way to go. But what is clear in this collection is that boards are better when they are fuelled by diversity of thought as well as background.

We are incredibly grateful to all the trustees that have contributed their personal and professional experiences. We hope it will provide food for thought about the importance of diversity, and inspire the wider sector to continue striving for a truly inclusive trust community.



*Unity Howard*  
**Director,  
New Schools Network**



*Leora Cruddas*  
**Chief Executive,  
Confederation of School Trusts**

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# FOREWORD

*Matthew Syed*



**I have long argued that cognitive diversity – that’s to say, differences in the way people think, reason and make sense of the world – is the cornerstone of innovation and wise decision making.**

For when people are surrounded by people who think in the same way, they are doing little more than creating an echo chamber.

It is always worth remembering that we are blind to our own blind spots. We perceive and interpret the world through frames of reference but we do not see the frames of reference themselves. We are like fish swimming around in the tank but never noticing the water. We cannot step outside our own vantage point to see just how much we would gain from seeing the world in a new way.

The journalist Reni Eddo-Lodge has written about the time she started to cycle to work. It was a decision that not merely reduced the cost of commuting, but opened her eyes. “An uncomfortable truth dawned upon me as I lugged my bike up and down flights of stairs in commuter-town train stations: the majority of public transport I’d been travelling on was not easily accessible. No ramps. No lifts. Nigh-on impossible to access for parents with buggies, or people using wheelchairs, or people with mobility issues, like a frame or a cane. Before I’d had my own wheels to carry, I’d never noticed this problem. I’d been oblivious to the fact that this lack of accessibility was affecting hundreds of people.”

The experience helped her to see something that she was previously blind to. It provided her with a reference point that, previously, she had not merely lacked, but didn’t know that she lacked.

Of course, this example doesn’t imply that commuter stations should necessarily be equipped with ramps, stairs or lifts. But it does show that we can only perform an accurate cost-benefit analysis if the costs and benefits are perceived. This, in turn, hinges on cognitive diversity. People who can help us to see our own blind spots, and who we can help to see theirs.

School governance can benefit from diversity, too. Take, as one example, how young people often offer a different vantage point to those (like me) who are in middle age. Anyone who has struggled with a new technology, will have been amazed at how quickly younger people take to it. This is why many organisations have created shadow boards – recruiting young people and giving them direct access to executive decision makers.

A paper in the Harvard Business Review contrasted the different fortunes of Prada and Gucci, two high end fashion brands. Prada has traditionally enjoyed high margins, but experienced a slump between 2014 and 2017. Why? A public announcement in 2018 acknowledged that the company had been ‘slow in realizing the importance of digital channels and the blogging online ‘influencers’ which are disrupting the industry.’ CEO Patrizio Bertelli said, ‘We made a mistake.’



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As for Gucci, they created a shadow board of young people who had consistent interaction with the senior team. They talk through the issues that the executive committee is focused on and their insights have ‘served as a wakeup call for the executives.’ Gucci’s sales have since grown 136% — from 3,497 million Euro (FY2014) to 8,285 million Euro (FY2018) — a growth driven largely by the success of both its internet and digital strategies. In the same period, Prada’s sales have dropped by 11.5%, from 3,551 million Euro (FY2014) to 3,142 million Euro (FY2018).

One final example: in a study led by Katherine Phillips, professor at Columbia Business School, teams were given the task of solving a murder mystery. They were given plenty of material, composing alibis, witness statements, lists of suspects and the like. In half the cases, the groups tasked with solving the problem were composed of four friends. The other half were composed of three friends and a stranger— an outsider, someone from beyond their social milieu. By now, it should come as no surprise that the teams with an outsider performed better. Much better. They got the right answer 75 percent of the time, compared with 54 percent for a homogenous group, and 44 percent for individuals working alone.

But here’s the thing. Those in the two groups had very different experiences of the task. Those in diverse teams found the discussion cognitively demanding. There was plenty of debate and disagreement, because different perspectives were aired. They typically came to the right decisions, but they were not wholly certain about them. The fact that they had had such full and frank discussion of the case meant that they were exposed to its inherent complexity.

But what of the homogenous teams? Their experiences were radically different. They found the session more agreeable because they spent most of the time, well, agreeing. They were mirroring each other’s perspectives. And although they were more likely to be wrong, they were far more confident about being right. They were not challenged on their blind spots, so didn’t get a chance to see them. They were not exposed to other perspectives, so became more certain of their own.

And this hints at the danger with homogenous groups. They are comfortable. They are often very enjoyable. You are surrounded with people who are like-minded. But they are also dangerous – something that all school governing and trust boards should remember.

**Which is why diversity is such a powerful asset, a way of overcoming the tendency towards groupthink, driving better ideas and superior strategies. Indeed, I would suggest that it is the single most precious quality an organisation can have.**

# BAL SAMRA

*Trustee, Ormiston Academies Trust*



## All businesses are overseen by some sort of governance, and generally, at the top sits the “board”.

The board has a number of fiduciary duties, but, more importantly, the board holds the mission and purpose of the company, and, if it's doing its job well, helps management deal with complex problems. An effective board is an inclusive board, a board which actively promotes diversity of thought, perspective, and opinion – and sees it as a helpful asset rather than an obligation.

Having personal experience of multiple boards as an Executive and Non-Executive Director and Chair, for me, it's a no brainer that good, diverse boards deliver outstanding results. There's nothing better than a group of board members who are unified by the mission and purpose of the business, but who also bring something different to a debate driven by their cognitive diversity (thought, insight, perspective) and their demographic diversity (class, gender, race).

But it's more than just board representation; diversity is about culture and leadership. Large organisations inevitably have a pull towards default systems; these are systems which reinforce existing and inherent views. I call it the “Cultural Filter”, promoting and reinforcing the ideas and the people who think like us.

Leaders choose to be active in creating an inclusive culture or unknowingly create an exclusive culture. For sure, shifting the culture or the mind-set is an active thing; it needs leaders to take a personal interest or else it gets lost amongst all their other priorities.

In my experience, unless leaders convince themselves that diversity will improve outcomes, it will never get the buy-in from the rest of the organisation. Either nothing happens, or, even worse, albeit with good intent, lots of unsupported initiatives are put in place which doesn't truly improve things. I call it “initiativitus”. Unless initiatives are believed, owned, driven and backed up by a culture actively promoting diversity of opinion they're never successful.

Throughout my own professional life as a Senior Executive, I've never thought of it as a box-ticking exercise. My focus has always been on building the best team for the best business outcome. As it happens, I've had incredibly diverse teams – why is that? It's the mind-set – I happen to think diversity of thought equals more ideas, which in turn equals more innovation, and results in better outcomes.

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Board diversity in an academy trust world is even more important. On the one hand, it's precisely the same as any other business in terms of fiduciary responsibilities – we need experts from the educational sector, we need functional experts and management experts. Where it's different is that we're shaping and supporting future outcomes for generations to come. The bar is much higher for an inclusive,

diverse board. It's the learnt experiences that can make a big difference too: boards should be able to relate to and empathise with the challenges and decisions teachers, and students, need to make every day.

Having sat on Ormiston Academies Trust for a number of years, I've been strongly impressed with the care, commitment and dedication the management team and the board put into delivering better outcomes. My motivation to join the board was twofold: the ambition behind the mission of Ormiston Academies Trust set up by the brilliant Peter Murray - we aim to change the life chance of every Ormiston child. Secondly, in a small way, I think my cognitive diversity and demographic diversity combined has enabled me to deliver a complementary perspective to my fellow colleagues on the board.

I don't come from the educational sector, and my demographic diversity is likely to be different from most others on the board. My parents were first-generation immigrants who came to the UK in 1959, married as teenagers here and quickly had four sons. When they arrived, they couldn't speak a word of English, and I was one of only two kids from an ethnic minority background in the whole school - a school in a working-class environment which had one of the lowest performance results in the country. My family had little understanding or time to support my education. I totally relied on the guidance and support I got through my state school education that, combined with my family values, enabled me to see beyond the glass ceiling. My school is now, in fact, part of the Ormiston Academy Trust. It's never easy to fully understand the real impact of the complex decisions we all face sitting on the board, but my own lived experiences can, to some extent, bridge that gap.

In this sector, there's much that we do, which is great, but there are some things I think we could still strive to do better. I'd like to see more involvement from the students at certain levels; I believe the local governing bodies play a pivotal role in connecting to the communities we serve, they're the junction box in the governance system. Are we doing enough to attract more people to those boards? I'd love to see more successful alumni sitting on local governing bodies - real role models that students can look up to and who help re-frame their ambitions. I'd like to see more people who have learnt experiences like myself sitting on main academy boards.

I sit on many boards, all of whom over the last few months have grappled with issues surrounding COVID-19, Ormiston amongst them. It's a reminder to me that whilst we need to continue to strive to do better, the academy sector should be rightly proud of the extraordinary job it does to make a difference to our society and the life chances of the future generation.

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# JENNESE ALOZIE

*Director, STEP Academy Trust;*

*Trustee, The Shared Learning Trust/Dunraven Trust*

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## **Striving Together for Excellence in Partnership (STEP) is what is at the heart of our academy trust's mission; we are bound by values that drive the behaviours we have come to understand our diverse communities want, expect, and need.**

STEP Academy Trust has built a strong group of 17 primary schools that work and support their communities in partnership with each other, no matter where those children and their families live. Being a school in a challenging part of Peckham or New Addington should never limit your expectations or reach – we say. Although deprivation might be an obvious factor that links the schools, we feel morally bound to support, and learn with and from them. I would emphatically claim that it's the diversity of our rich and dynamic communities that has allowed us to develop pedagogical approaches, excellent leaders, and a body of pupils who are enthusing us daily with their unique and inspiring insights.

Being diverse is the cornerstone of our success: it means we are and have had to find unexpected ways to know, understand and grow with our pupils, staff and communities – anchored by our moral compass. I believe not much of this would have been possible without a diverse range of leaders and a board that now, more than ever, reflects the diversity within our society. The trust board members reflect our conscious effort to draw upon the professional expertise and unique lived experiences for all walks of life. Without these lenses from which to view our schools, key questions would be missed, and poor assumptions could be made.

From experience, a model of deficit thinking could have led us all to lose hope and not remain resolute and determined to hear the voices of our communities. We may not have realised the importance of celebrating and drawing upon what makes them strong and, in partnership, crafting curriculum and models for school improvement and growth. All of which should mirror the strengths and areas for development that our families locally, and society, need. However, we do not take for granted what we know, nor do we stop being strategic, pragmatic, flexible and responsive; all this whilst remaining firm to our moral purpose. Social justice is at the heart of our work within STEP, and without diversity of thought, experience and expertise, we could not be a success with, and for, the families we serve.

Being a Black female, operating at an executive level, where leaders in the profession are predominantly white and male is both thrilling and exhausting. Many have questioned: 'How are you still in that role, four years on? How have they allowed you, a Black woman, to work across 17 schools?' The answer is obvious. Knowing the diverse range of skills and expertise required to build, lead and develop an academy trust

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To really grow as a trust, we needed to get uncomfortable; to allow ourselves to be up for scrutiny and accept that our ideas or plans may not be the best way forward. So, if I talk of being exhausted by the constant questioning or disagreement, I smile because effective diversity brings with it a dynamic set of decisions handcrafted by each person within and across our staff team for the benefit of all, not the chosen few.



is only possible if your board understands that having an executive team who all think and behave in the same way is the fastest way to fail. Diversity of thought, of expertise, of outlook on life and education, and of one's own life journey adds a richness clones of oneself cannot. It allows for the level of challenge and scrutiny only someone quite different from yourself can bring. No point looking in the mirror and telling yourself it's all great when deep inside we know it's not – that's what a lack of diversity often leads to.

I remember, so vividly, questioning why everyone was so polite, so agreeable, and our CEO every now and again reminds me of it – it didn't feel natural and, to me, indicated something important was bound to be missed. To really grow as a trust, we needed to get uncomfortable; to allow ourselves to be up for scrutiny and accept that our ideas or plans may not be the best way forward. So, if I talk of being exhausted by the constant questioning or disagreement, I smile because effective diversity brings with it a dynamic set of decisions handcrafted by each person within and across our staff team for the benefit of all, not the chosen few.

More recently, I became a Trustee and Director of a mixed academy trust, and have been co-opted to another mixed academy trust. Those trustees were honest about what their board lacked and why my expertise would benefit their trust journey at this time. Embracing diversity can feel daunting, but our successes across STEP Academy Trust would be limited without it. So, whether diversity is in the form of professional background, area of upbringing, culture or gender, one thing is certain: sustainable growth and high standards become unreachable without it. After all, who will be brave enough to champion our children, communities and staff if their worldview was limited by their experiences alone? Our trust board knows that and the boards I am part of have come to understand and appreciate that too. Our children are diverse, so we have to find ways to reflect that – why wouldn't we shape a trust board and academy community that mirrored the world we are preparing our children to shape and live in?

In the same way that we are striving to fully represent the world to our children, we are also duty-bound to widen our curriculum lens and stop presenting narrow views of people, cultures, religions and those different to self. The Black Lives Matter movement and the need for anti-racist educational institutions that go beyond adding a new book to the booklist has gone beyond a quiet hope. For me, it becomes the social justice narrative drum, which every part of our organisation has started to move to, together, in partnership. We have collectively declared that our children need us to stop pretending that we are all the same; embrace the fact that our lived experiences are different, and restart our system leadership journeys by demonstrating why diversity is the root to success. We know that if that diversity is not intrinsic to a trust board then effective governance is not possible, and the voices of our staff, pupils and community could go unheard, unnoticed and lead to more years of inaction.

# KAM KOTHIA

*Chair, Star Academies*



**Star Academies is one of the UK's leading education providers. In 2011 we were approved to open our first free school with a faith foundation to develop on the success of our Outstanding Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School.**

From these roots in Blackburn-with-Darwen, we have established a national presence. As a mixed academy trust, our diverse network now comprises 29 primary and secondary schools, including both faith and non-faith establishments.

Our schools work together as Star Partnerships in five cluster areas – Lancashire, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, West Midlands and London. The communities we serve are in disadvantaged areas, several of which have come to recent national notice because of the increased prevalence of COVID-19. Our Star family is diverse and inclusive, including pupils and staff from different racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This diversity is a source of inspiration and celebration. We are a values-based organisation, united by aspiration and service, and passionately committed to enhancing social mobility. All our efforts are geared towards raising the aspirations of children and young people in areas of social and economic deprivation.

Our founder school and many of our free schools feature at the top of national league tables in recognition of their attainment, progress and attendance. We also sponsor schools that have a history of low attainment; we are committed to transforming their outcomes and improving their children's life chances. As we operate in different localities and within many diverse communities, the board of trustees is mindful of the need to recognise and represent all of our schools within our strategic planning and governance oversight.

Our original board of trustees was developed from the governing body of our founder school. As we grew, we recognised that the board needed increased diversity itself to ensure we could support our aspirations to replicate our educational model in deprived communities across regions. This required our board to include members with varied professional experience and different backgrounds. Ensuring that ambitious, experienced, values-driven people are in place to provide the support and challenge that galvanise improvement is a challenge that faces many boards as they transition from single to multi-academy trusts. Our Trust, in contrast to many, sought to recruit non-BAME individuals to ensure effective representation of the communities we serve, and draw on the wisdom and experience of people from different secular and faith traditions. We actively sought those who subscribed to our vision of education as a means to secure a better future by nurturing today's young people and inspiring tomorrow's leaders.



## Diversity is not about compliance; it is a guiding principle that is central to everything we do.

I believe having a committed and representative board enhances our governance and decision making. On our growth journey, we have recruited Members and Trustees who are intrinsically committed and reflective of a modern multi-cultural society. Diversity is not about compliance; it is a guiding principle that is central to everything we do.

I started as a school governor over 18 years ago, and the change in my role reflects the transformed landscape of governance. During this time, it has been extremely rewarding to support the ongoing development and outstanding success of a local community school and then to bring the vision of Star Academies to realisation. My focus remains on providing an outstanding Star education to increasing numbers of children and young people. The structures, people and processes of governance may have changed, but the fundamental belief in the role as an essential organ of civic leadership remains.

My professional background is in digital technology, having established eBusiness UK Ltd in 1998 to supply e-commerce, e-marketing and website design solutions to SMEs in the North West. Alongside my role as Chair of Star Academies' board of trustees, I serve on the board of Falcon Education Academies Trust, the board of The Duke of Lancaster's Regiment, and serve as a Deputy Lieutenant of Lancashire. My previous commitments have included being a Director of Business Link Lancashire and a Director of the East Lancashire Partnership. I was also a founding member of the Department for Trade and Industry's Ministerial Ethnic Minority Business Forum. These roles have provided me with the opportunity to work alongside many passionate individuals who have shown a commitment to business and community development.

The transition from a local governing body to a board of trustees has had challenges. On our journey, we have had difficult conversations with individuals about roles. We have engaged in extensive strategic visioning and planning to ensure that as we became a mixed academy trust, we remained committed to our values as well as being able to deliver our wider educational model. This has only been possible by developing the diversity of our board. Tokenism does not equate with equality, nor ensure quality in recruitment. Any move towards widening diversity, as with most challenges in our society, has to be built with strong underpinning relationships and commitment. We may be diverse in our characteristics, but we are united in our vision, mission and values.



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# KAREN GILES

## *Chair, Inspire Partnership*



## **The Inspire Partnership became a multi-academy trust in 2017 and is formed of nine primary schools serving communities in Croydon, Medway and Greenwich.**

We aim to transform the lives of children, and we believe the best way to achieve this is through relationships and collaboration. We celebrate the diversity and uniqueness of our schools but believe together, we are stronger. Our staff and children place no limits on learning, and our schools are inspiring places to learn.

Our vision is to transform the future for our children through partnership and collaboration. Placing children at the centre of all we do, we aim to create a climate where excellence flourishes as a result of outstanding leadership, engaging teaching and high-quality learning.

### **OUR PARTNERSHIP VALUES:**

- **Collaboration** matters
- **Community** first
- **Continuous** growth
- **Excellence** in everything
- **Equity** for everyone

I have been the Chair of the board of trustees since September 2018. My day job is Headteacher of Barham Primary School, a position I have held for the last 17 years. As a local authority maintained school, the governance structures differ from those of a trust; therefore, I sometimes feel like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde when shifting roles. On one side of London, I'm a mild mannered ex-officio Headteacher Governor. On the other side, I chair a trust board with Members above and governing boards below, switching roles and accountabilities on the Jubilee line.

Board diversity is important because, as so succinctly captured in McKinsey's May 2020 report, 'Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters, "...the greater the representation, the higher the outperformance..." with outperformance being even higher for diversity in ethnicity than for gender. Diversity in all dimensions is incredibly important, not just protected characteristics but age, location represented, expertise, experience, introverts, extroverts, as well as reflecting the communities we serve. The supportive association of allyship is an essential component as well as inclusion and equality. This intoxicating mix provides a diversity of thought, openness and belonging whilst enabling us to de-bias our processes and act as challenging champions.

If I were to reflect on my lived experience personally, I would say one couldn't make it up.

Headship of a multi-faith, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual titan primary school of more than 930 pupils and approximately 150 members of staff, system leadership in the form of coaching, mentoring and leadership development, as well as the odd public speaking engagement, keeps me overstimulated and overcommitted. Where, you ask, would I get the time, never mind the inclination, to do what I do with Inspire? The answer is because Inspire is an extraordinary place of integrity, where I learn and grow in a different leadership dimension. A place that does what it says it does. A board of deep listening and in-depth dialogue. A board to build, refine, grow and leave in a better position than found.



Diversity in all dimensions is incredibly important, not just protected characteristics but age, location represented, expertise, experience, introverts, extroverts, as well as reflecting the communities we serve. The supportive association of allyship is an essential component as well as inclusion and equality.

As a personal reflection on my lived experience, my journey began at secondary school as the class then year representative for the school council. I volunteered to be a course representative at university, and have always put myself forward as a teacher member of the governing board. As a Deputy Headteacher, I attended every meeting and observed the Headteacher. Boards I have served have particularly welcomed my perspective, not necessarily in terms of race or gender but usually my professional experience and expertise. I sit on many boards at present because I have a thirst for the strategic, getting involved, making a difference, disseminating good practice and joining the dots.

The impact diverse boards have is their breadth and depth to challenge and go beyond compliance and accountability. Diverse boards recognise intersectionality. Diverse boards provide support for school leaders during these most challenging times taking our duty of care seriously. True impact can best be achieved by setting and publicising diversity and inclusion targets, capturing data and publicising progress: holding ourselves and others to account. Impact is indicated by genuine equality, openness and belonging.

#### **MY KEY REFLECTIVE POINTS ARE:**

- For Chairs to recognise the importance of their roles as leaders, instigators and facilitators of change, influenced by global factors.
- The formation of a Nominations Committee which enables a systematic approach to recruitment to your boards, a place for all open conversations about who you need and how you appoint (the Academy Ambassadors Programme is free, bespoke and high-calibre), induct and stimulate the right people. Mentorship and training are crucial to retaining great people as well as a glossary for the three-letter acronyms, the language of most schools.
- I cannot recommend the Governance Leadership Programme enough in providing the knowledge and the confidence required for impact. It is provided by the Confederation of School Trusts, the Church of England and Ambition Institute.
- Follow governance experts on social media, e.g. @AcademyAmb, @CSTvoice.
- The National Governance Association and Education and Employers Everyone on Board aims to increase governing board diversity to bring a different way of thinking, role modelling, give local communities confidence in its schools, provide insight on issues faced by young people, help create a culture of inclusion and the opportunity to gain skills to grow.
- Serving on any board should be seen as a reciprocal arrangement. What can we offer in exchange for board members time and expertise?

The COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed the way boards prioritise and operate. During this recovery phase, our level of accountability to the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement will change our thoughts and actions in non-negotiable ways. We will use the strengths and opportunities rather than focussing solely on weaknesses and threats, to have bold and open conversations to be the change we wish to see.

# DR. TESCA BENNETT

*Trustee, Astrea Academy Trust*



## When it comes to boardroom diversity, one has to start with the Nolan Principles of public life.

In the educational and charity sectors we are serving to help those who are often already disadvantaged, and are entrusted with the decisions of governance in the public interests. And in my view, it is the third principle that ‘Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias’ where boards ought to examine themselves under a lens.

When you analyse the statistics on diversity and representation both at executive and non-executive board level over the last five years, whether in the educational, charity or corporate sector, you have to ask the question: where is that ‘best evidence’ base drawn from? And how impartial is the decision making when boards are still so underrepresented in term of race, gender and socio-economic status?

Diversity is about making informed decisions whilst having the knowledge and perspective from different viewpoints. To stick with the photography theme, it’s the difference between capturing a complex landscape through a fixed telescopic photo lens, that provides a restricted, magnified, distant vista, compared to using a panoramic lens from a range of different vantage points affording you a broader, sometimes unfamiliar, but all embracing view. It challenges boards to consider, debate and reflect on their motivations and aims.

I am always interested in how much of the vision, values and ethos of the organisation is reflected in the culture of the board and vice versa. When I sit on a board, I want to be an active member, devoting due time and commitment to what I consider to be a role of great responsibility and privilege.

“ To be clear, increasing diversity shouldn’t be a lowering of standards or expectations – that edges dangerously into the arena of tokenism – and, of course, everyone wants to be valued on the merit of their qualifications, skills and experiences. It is about boards casting the net wider, in different networks and making a commitment to incorporate and utilise them along with the views of others.

And in truth, I have had mixed experiences sitting on boards in different stages of their ‘development’. At one end of the spectrum, there are the more progressive boards that have refreshingly embraced an open, non-hierarchical structure, where they are keen for board members to provide critical challenge, be innovative and – importantly – actively seek contributions from all board members.

Equally they provide a safe space to learn, provide intentional induction and training to better understand the role and organisation.



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## There is something relatable about seeing other people that you can identify with in positions of influence.

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Conversely, I have sat on boards that want to have board diversity without it changing the culture of the board. It was on one of those boards that the Chairman voiced “that is not the way we do things here!” in response to a question on board recruitment processes.

Core business functions such as recruitment and training can serve to perpetuate the narrowing of perspectives and viewpoints, since these can be based on the networks and experiences of the recruiters or trainers. If boards are filled with people with similar life experiences, backgrounds and social norms, then there is a higher probability of similarity in their barometer of norms, success and standards because our perspectives influence our expectations.

In my experience, boards with more diversity attract more diverse candidates. There is something relatable about seeing other people that you can identify with in positions of influence. Although sometimes reluctant role models, board members of differing gender, race and socio economic backgrounds are a powerful visible beacon to others that their knowledge and experiences are of value.

To be clear, increasing diversity shouldn't be a lowering of standards or expectations – that edges dangerously into the arena of tokenism – and, of course, everyone wants to be valued on the merit of their qualifications, skills and experiences. It is about boards casting the net wider, in different networks and making a commitment to incorporate and utilise them along with the views of others.

The accessibility of our global society means that cultures are constantly blending and evolving. If we don't intentionally and strategically plan structural changes to reflect that, we will be forever trying to catch up and the losers will be the very people we are seeking to serve.

Sometimes it is important to throw the debate up in the air and go through that ‘storming and norming’ process as part of the group's development, to fine tune and consolidate the integrity of a boards' decision making.

I won't ever shy away from asking questions and challenging the status quo. It isn't always about getting others to agree, it is equally important for me to understand the thought process and differing views of others and why they may have reached a different conclusion to me.

It is encouraging that there is a growing, if gradual, social appetite for change at the top, but whether there is the political and economic will and leverage to provide traction, remains to be seen. In my experience, diversity changes the dynamics, outlook and capacity of a board – the approach is more considered, open and inclusive. As a result, it is difficult to operate in the same way we have always done and to my mind that can only be a good thing.

# ARUNA MEHTA

*Trustee, The Kemnal Academy Trust*



**The Kemnal Academy Trust (TKAT) is one of the largest academy trusts, overseeing the running of 45 academies that deliver high-quality education to over 20,000 children in South East England.**

I was appointed to the TKAT board in September 2013 following a period as a governor at a local primary school in Wandsworth, where I saw the challenges of delivering high-quality education in socio-economically deprived communities. I was attracted to TKAT because it was made up of underperforming schools in the most deprived areas. I also have board roles at Greenwich University, the NHS and Clarion Housing Association, as I recognise that education, health and housing are fundamental to enabling everyone to reach their potential. It has been both a privilege and humbling experience to work in teams that influence the lives, opportunities, and futures of these communities.

I believe academy trusts have made much progress in recent years. Governance, and financial and risk frameworks have improved and evolved, enabling the advancement in raising academic standards and the sharing of best practice across school networks.

Events in recent months have highlighted significant inequalities in our society. The higher death rate from coronavirus amongst minority communities is recognised to be significantly linked to social and economic deprivation. These communities often have poor access to preventive healthcare and hence, poorly managed chronic health conditions which in turn puts them at a higher risk. Our healthcare system has, perhaps unintentionally, ignored the health needs of this group. At the height of the pandemic, the tragic death of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement officers rocked communities in the United States and beyond its shores. The ensuing Black Lives Matter movement highlighted the plight of Black communities across the world. Furthermore, this year's A level results appeared to systematically disadvantage students from schools in socio-economically deprived areas, with no recognition of individual potential or achievements. The coming together of the pandemic, Black Lives Matter movement and the A level results fiasco makes these societal injustices undeniable and marginalised communities are demanding, and deserve, better.

Prior to these events, some boards believed that they had policies and procedures in place to ensure fairness in everything they did. Indeed, some had declared that they did not see colour and felt that people were treated equally regardless of ethnicity. Such a statement is nothing short of inaccurate when addressing diversity and inclusion challenges. How can these issues be addressed within organisations if boards don't see the problem?

Trustees of academy trust boards are in a unique position of influence to bring about the social change that is so desperately needed. Boards should acknowledge, accept and take action to address these inequalities within their organisations. Given that schools are responsible for delivering better outcomes for future generations, they must foster a culture that is respectful and acknowledges students' and staff's backgrounds. It is only through this acknowledgement that schools can begin to create equality of opportunities and aspirations for the next generation.



It is time for trust boards to have an open and honest debate to acknowledge where they are, ascertain where they would like to be, take action and seek assurance regarding the outcomes of their actions.



To enable meaningful dialogues regarding equality of access and opportunity, there must be diversity at every level of the organisation, starting with the board. This will enable a more egalitarian culture that elevates different voices, integrates contrasting insights and welcomes conversations about diversity.

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### **POSITIVE ACTIONS THAT BOARDS COULD TAKE INCLUDE:**

1. Embarking on a staff engagement programme to define the values of the organisation. These should be values that can and must be lived and embraced by the entire organisation.
2. Embedding the values into the organisation, by
  - a. Extensive communication and training across the organisation, starting with the board.
  - b. Updating policies and procedures to reflect equity of access in recruitment, retention and building the pipeline of talent that reflects the communities we serve.
  - c. Reviewing and reshaping the teaching curriculum so that it is more inclusive and representative of wider society.
  - d. Rewarding positive behaviour and calling out conduct where it does not align with culture or values.
  - e. Encouraging the creation of cohesive networks, enabling constructive dialogue in a safe space.
3. Seeking assurance by
  - a. Visiting and engaging with schools to gain first-hand information.
  - b. Gathering regular feedback from staff. This is important as staff are fundamentally the drivers of school culture.
  - c. Asking for student and parental input and feedback.
  - d. Asking for metrics that show the breakdown of protected characteristics among staff, students and leadership.
4. Having a trustee champion for equality, diversity and inclusion that is a standing item on the board agenda. The board, through the champion, should foster engagement with staff and stakeholders on equality and diversity issues. Underpinning this, there must be a Board Assurance Framework on all matters related to this area.

Cultural cohesion has the potential to lead to excellence in educational outcomes by creating a learning and respectful environment. Staff are the greatest asset to any organisation, and school staff are critical to the outcomes for our children and future generations. Regulators have a key role to play in this arena. It is well known that what gets measured and rated gets done hence including equality, diversity and inclusion in the assessment framework would indeed help drive cultural cohesion.

## New Schools Network

New Schools Network is an independent charity passionate about ending educational inequality once and for all. NSN is working towards a future where every child has an equal chance to succeed in life, irrespective of their background. New Schools Network has been supporting free school groups for over 10 years: we partner with individuals, groups, trusts and business leaders to establish, run and improve innovative schools which respond to the needs to their communities. Our Academy Ambassadors Programme provides a free, bespoke service matching business leaders and professionals with academy trusts looking to strengthen their boards.

[www.newschoolsnetwork.org](http://www.newschoolsnetwork.org) | [www.academyambassadors.org](http://www.academyambassadors.org)

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## Confederation of School Trusts

The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for school trusts in England advocating for, connecting and supporting executive and governance leaders. We are a membership organisation of organisations. This means that the organisation – the Trust – is the member. Our mission is to build an excellent education system in England – every school part of a strong and sustainable group in which every child is a powerful learner and adults learn and develop together as teachers and leaders.

[www.cstuk.org.uk](http://www.cstuk.org.uk)

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