

A Sense of Belonging – recognising the importance of being truly inclusive

An artistic illustration of several hands of different skin tones (light, medium, and dark brown) reaching towards the center and interlacing to form a circular shape. The style is painterly with soft shading and visible brushstrokes.

As educators, we have a vital role to play in educating and guiding young children's learning about equality, diversity and social justice.

Dr Stella Louis, 2020



Froebel emphasised that the community of learners will be made richer by embracing and valuing the uniqueness and diversity of all children. "Every child should be accepted as an indispensable and essential member of the human race" (Froebel in Lilley, 1967:59)

***Our journey began with a question.
"Are we doing everything we can to
ensure that every child, and their
family, in our community has a sense
of belonging?"***

The team here at Poppies, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, have been reflecting and examining the ways in which gender and race are integrated in the nursery environment. This was a whole team approach which included modern apprentices, domestic staff and practitioners with varying degrees of experience in early years education.

Main Research Questions to Explore were:

- What is your understanding of a sense of belonging and inclusion in the nursery environment?*
- What does an environment that is safe, inclusive and respectful look like?*
- In what ways do we support practitioners and children to understand different views, perspectives and differences?*

Knowledgeable, Nurturing, Reflective Educators



As knowledgeable, nurturing, reflective educators, we are committed to lifelong personal and professional learning.

We wanted to be able to discuss our attitudes, beliefs and biases honestly whilst recognising we may need to show our vulnerability and be brave together.

Preliminary discussions as a team suggested that educators in our setting seemed uncomfortable discussing race and gender.

Results from a short survey supported this with over 86% of the team feeling like they needed more knowledge and understanding of race and gender.

As practitioners and colleagues, we wanted to become more confident in discussing and teaching children about race and gender.

We also wanted to further develop our cultural knowledge of the children and families who attend our nursery.

A whole nursery approach reflecting on how we could improve our practice and policies :

Training & Ongoing Professional Development :

- Dr Stella Louis was our mentor for the project. We were fortunate to have her join us in the nursery for two specific training days, working through “Digging Deeper, Breaking Down Barriers and Normalising Discussions about Race, Disability and Gender.”
- Two lead practitioners undertook a four month Racial Literacy Training with Education Scotland.
- Using the videos “**Is my skin brown because I drank chocolate milk?**” Beverly Daniel Tatum and “**A Class Divided**” (full documentary, Frontline) led to some challenging, thought provoking, and honest discussions within focus groups and staff training sessions.
- Early Education webinar by Dr Stella Louis, “Let’s Talk About Race” and Dr Sharon Colilles, “Creating space for culturally appropriate resources in early years curricula”.
- LGBTQ+ Awareness training conducted by Four Pillars QuEST.
- Supporting Transgender training.
- Looking at and understanding how we use language and terminology appropriately.

Policies –

“Are our policies implemented in practice or a tokenistic model?”

- Reviewing our “Equality and Fairness” policy after some training led to our document being retitled “Equality, Diversity and Inclusion” and being updated to reflect our increased knowledge and understanding of inclusive practice.
- It was important to us that we embed our learning and understanding to become a long term approach; as a result we have implemented Equality, Diversity and Inclusion as part of our core training and as an annual refresher thereafter.
- Our ‘settling in’ policy was adapted with more flexibility given to settling in visits. This allows more time and space to discuss the children’s “All About Me” in depth with parents, especially with regard to home/first language or cultural celebrations. In this way we can celebrate this alongside them in a more meaningful way.

Celebrating Difference



- We completed a book and resource audit to ensure diversity.
- We purchased some new, age-appropriate books, including those with different families, challenging stereotyping and LGBTQ+.
- We adapted our resources and used these more regularly to promote discussion, different views and to help us further develop positive relationships in our nursery and wider community.

Progress – Working through uncomfortable feelings...

Adults working with children: Play, story, discussion, using resources

Examples:

Children discussing skin colour with a mirror at the drawing table, “That girl looks different to me, she has brown and black hair, she’s got socks like me, my skin is white and her skin is brown.”, “He has brown skin, I have pink skin, I love him”.

How we created opportunities to talk about similarities and differences:

- It was important that as a team we recognised that we had a crucial role to play in engaging with the children to deepen their thinking and understanding of the world around them.
- Our support needed to be gentle and age appropriate; we felt our role was to encourage curiosity and try to weave in some new ideas for the children to consider.
- We practised different ways to approach positive discussions about skin colour such as using a mirror to help us see the similarities and differences between us. We used skin tone paints and pencils in our self portraits
- We asked parents to provide us with a family photograph which we printed A4 and laminated to create placemats for mealtimes. The children love to share their own personal family stories at the dinner table.

Children discussing “The Princess Boy”

Child 1 (he), “My favourite colour is pink”

Child 2 (she), “I like pink, blue and orange”

Child 3 (she), “Boys should have boy things, not girl things”

Child 2 (she), “But boys can wear dresses if they want to”

Child 1 (he), “I’d say nice things to them if a boy came to Poppies in a dress”

Child 3 (she), “I’d say I like your dress”

Child 4 (he), “It’s ok to come to nursery in a dress, I come to nursery in my leggings” (referring to his older sisters leggings, which he wears.)

The adult used technology to introduce the children to a variety of photographs of children and adults in traditional and diverse styles of clothing. This encouraged the children to consider what we had in common and included celebrating the differences around the world. By encouraging the children to talk about the photos they began to make links with others in the wider community beyond our nursery and led to this remark: “Clothes are clothes, we can wear any colours or styles we like.”

Adults learning how to be comfortable with difficult conversations

“People like to be comfortable. Thinking new thoughts, meeting new ideas, changing your ways are all inevitably uncomfortable.” (Bruce, 1997:187)

Initially we found any conversations around race and LGBTQ+ difficult: very quickly we learned the value of being honest and talking openly about diversity and inclusion. We found our training and professional discussions with others really helped us, especially with language and terminology.

Extracts from staff reflective journals:

“..I’ve been thinking a lot about pronouns and gender. I found the training evening really important to help with terminologies. I find myself saying “friends and never boys and girls.”

“..Since this training I feel I now have the knowledge and confidence to counteract any racial/discriminatory stereotypes.”

“I am working on confidence, I feel we are getting to know each other’s comfort zones and I feel better about being honest when we are together.”

Feedback from Focus Group Discussions

“Working in small groups helps us to be more comfortable and honest.”

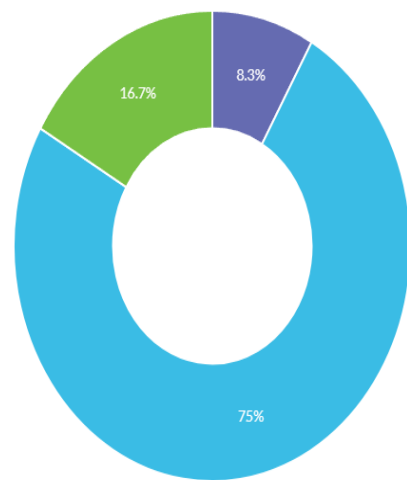
“It’s a good opportunity for us to reflect on things together.”

“I’m going to work on being more honest and open in discussing race and my own understanding of it.”

Q1

How confident are you now in discussing and teaching children about race and gender?

Multiple Choice



Choice

↕

Total

● I feel very confident

1

● I feel comfortable to discuss

9

● I still require support with some aspects

2

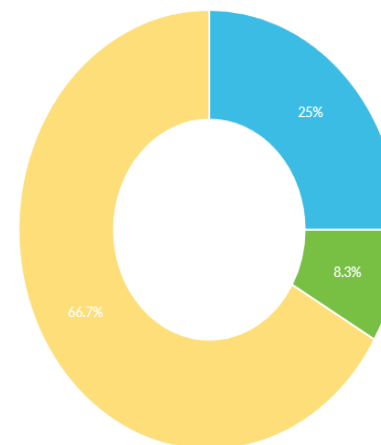
● I still feel that I'm not confident enough

0

Q3

We used a number of different ways to share and learn together. Which did you find most effective?

Multiple Choice



Choice

↕

Total

● Chosen articles/ publications/ video

0

● Training sessions led by a speaker

3

● Small focus group discussions

1

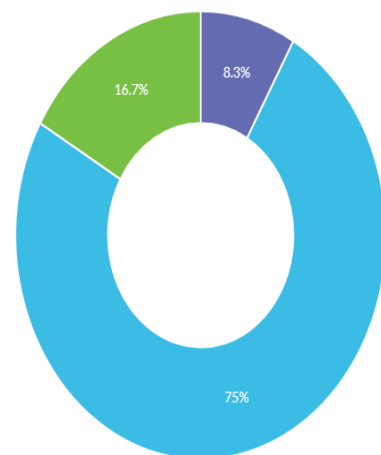
● All of the ways

8

Q2

How confident would you be now in addressing insensitive or inappropriate comments made by staff or colleagues about our families or colleagues?

Multiple Choice



Choice

↕

Total

↕

● I feel very confident

1

● I feel comfortable to discuss

9

● I still require support with some aspects

2

● I still feel I'm not confident enough

0

Staff Comments - Right now, I am feeling...

“I feel like I have a truer understanding of racism and its impact on people. I want to be more open with children in conversations and not shy away from any tricky conversations.”

“That this has really opened my eyes to all the different types of bias and discrimination we face, especially gender which I hadn’t considered before.”

“I am feeling inspired to learn more about discrimination and bias and the effects this can have on others.”

Impact on children, families and wider community

“The parts of the whole are the whole”(Connolly in Bruce 1987:48)

Feedback from a parent we worked closely with:

My child does not identify or express as the gender assigned at birth. This started at 2.5 years old and we have gone through many changes and steps along the way, being guided by our child on this journey. This was obviously a difficult topic that I needed support with from our childcare provider, Poppies Pre School.

Poppies have been source of huge support since Day 1. Sharon, the owner, listened to what we were experiencing and shared what she had seen in the nursery. We agreed the approach and this triggered some permanent changes at Poppies, one being the switch from “girls and boys” to “friends”, making it more inclusive for everyone. We have had to alter and tailor our approach to our child as a team and support each other through this process. It hasn't been easy but I couldn't have supported our child in the proper way without Sharon and the rest of the Poppies staff's help.

Our child's confidence has soared as a result and the transition to Primary 1 was smooth and straightforward. This was due to Sharon attending conversations with the school, highlighting the importance of inclusively training and taking this seriously. Sharon herself has shown humility, curiosity and an eagerness to understand that I will never forget. By creating that sense of belonging, it has made sure that Poppies isn't just an inclusive place for my child but all children that do not fit in to the stereotypical boxes or the 'norm'.

FEEDBACK FROM A PARENT AFTER AN OPEN EVENING:

“I was also impressed with your LGBTQ+ agenda and your overall direction of reviewing toys and books for gender stereotypes and diversity issues. I liked seeing dollies from different nationalities and colours.

If there are any way that we can help, please just say. Also, dad would very much like to come in and play some music with the children. We have a little bit of a collection of ‘world music’ instruments as he teaches ethnomusicology and we were thinking we could come in together to let the children have a play with the different instruments. They are all child friendly so could be quite informal.”

Our findings from the exploration of our main research questions

- **What is your understanding of a sense of belonging and inclusion in the nursery environment?**
- **What does an environment that is safe, inclusive and respectful look like?**
- **In what ways do we support practitioners and children to understand different views, perspectives and differences?**

It was important to us from the beginning of this journey that we explored what a “sense of belonging” meant to us in our nursery and beyond, in our community. We started with our family values and genuinely considered what we actually knew about our families, their cultures and traditions, their family structures and how we represented this within the nursery.

We recognised there was an opportunity for further development. A positive example of this was to allow much more time during the “settling in” period to get to know the parents well and build warm, strong and trusting relationship. Gathering information from families about home life, traditions and cultures helped us to make connections.

As a team we explored our understanding of different family structures. We examined our own beliefs and biases and reflected on them. As professionals we expanded our knowledge and grew in confidence which subsequently improved our interactions and discussions. We also acknowledged that we would make mistakes but we kept on trying our best and each time we discussed, reflected and learned from each other.

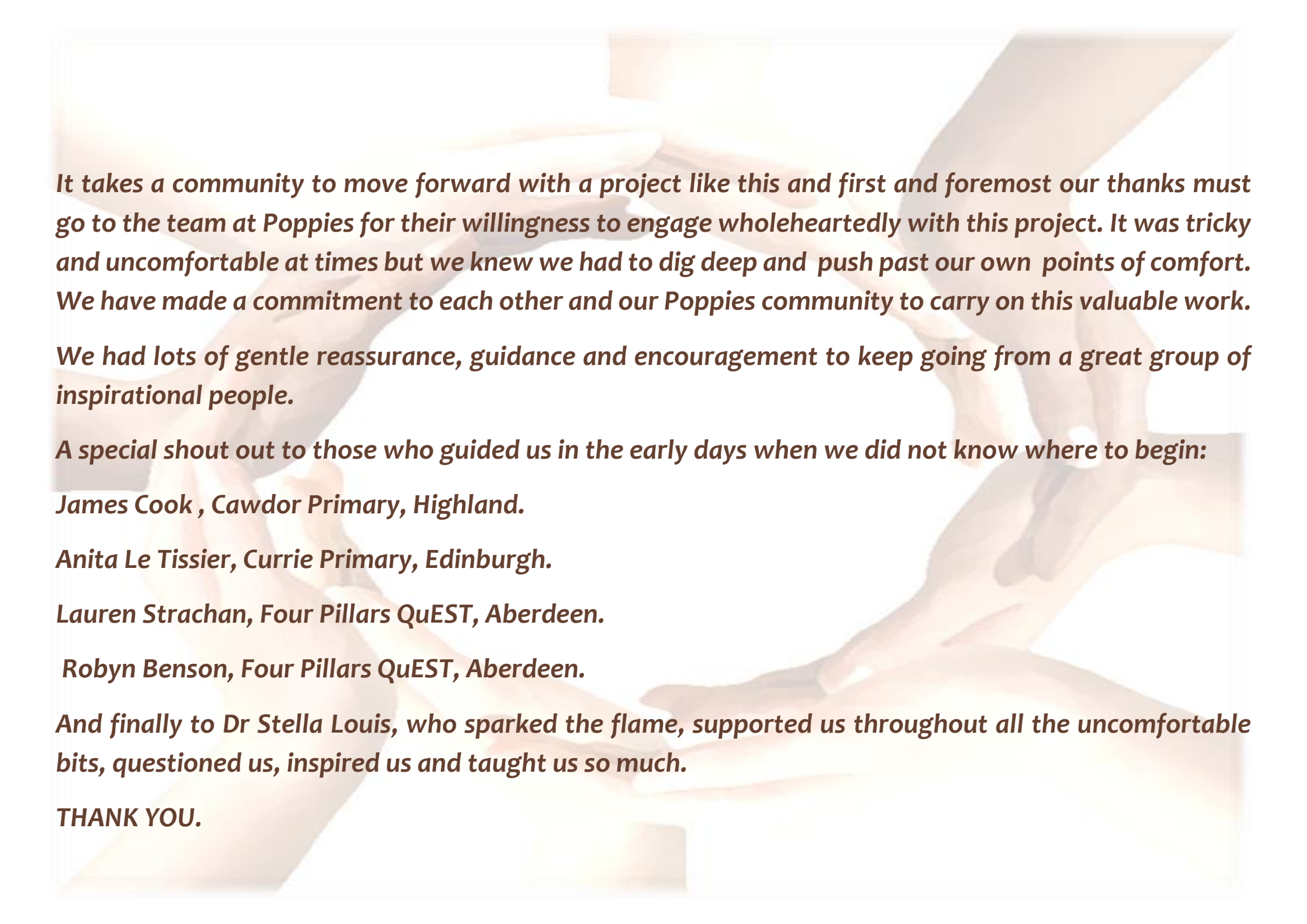
We considered how we used our resources and play spaces to reflect diversity and inclusion and used them as tools to promote discussion and critical thinking.

Our role as practitioners who use a Froebelian approach is to guide and support the children to begin to develop a knowledge and understanding of the community and world us. By continuing to reflect on our attitudes and beliefs and develop our own understanding of cultures and traditions we will be supporting every child to feel a sense of belonging within Poppies.

What next?

“Froebel valued the uniqueness of each individual, but he also placed great emphasis on the community. He argued that individuality and community are not opposites. Rather, the community is enriched by the diversity and uniqueness of individuals. So, in turn individuals gain a sense of belonging and connection from the community.” (Tovey, 2021:4)

- This is only the beginning of our journey and we have taken small but significant steps to improve. There is no “quick fix” from this work and at times it has caused disruption. This disruption will continue as we move forward.
- We understand that we must continuously work to truly embed the changes we have made, particularly the conversations that involve challenging our own stereotypes and biases .
- Knowledge, understanding and being better informed gives us the tools to speak up with more confidence when needed.
- We need to continue to look at different ways we can continue to promote and communicate positive messages about inclusivity and diversity to children, families and our wider community.
- We build on the very good relationships we have with our parents and continue to demonstrate a genuine interest in each family’s way of life, their beliefs and their personal identities.
- We know that it is vitally important that we all continue with this work, recognising that all children and families need to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion in our nursery.



It takes a community to move forward with a project like this and first and foremost our thanks must go to the team at Poppies for their willingness to engage wholeheartedly with this project. It was tricky and uncomfortable at times but we knew we had to dig deep and push past our own points of comfort. We have made a commitment to each other and our Poppies community to carry on this valuable work.

We had lots of gentle reassurance, guidance and encouragement to keep going from a great group of inspirational people.

A special shout out to those who guided us in the early days when we did not know where to begin:

James Cook , Cawdor Primary, Highland.

Anita Le Tissier, Currie Primary, Edinburgh.

Lauren Strachan, Four Pillars QuEST, Aberdeen.

Robyn Benson, Four Pillars QuEST, Aberdeen.

And finally to Dr Stella Louis, who sparked the flame, supported us throughout all the uncomfortable bits, questioned us, inspired us and taught us so much.

THANK YOU.