

Notes in support of our Exchange of Learning (EL) Programme 2024/2025: Isabel Jones Fielding

Our society is made up of diverse individuals, and the teacher anticipates and adjusts, to promote inclusion and welcome difference. Reasonable adjustment is an active process of rebalancing the scales, to promote inclusion, and is enshrined in the Equality Act 2010. 'Equality' (the same for all) is the old idea of treating everyone the same, but 'equity' means identifying the barriers that create inequality, and actively removing them to achieve fairness and create 'equality'. This is reasonable adjustment.

This year's exchange of learning (EL) programme, builds upon our 2023 – 24 EL days, where we had the opportunity to discuss the effects of discrimination, and the lack of diversity in our teaching community. With 35 EL days that happened across the UK and in Ireland last year, with more than 500 teachers joining the conversation, it was clear that the new exchange of learning format, helped facilitate confidence, and enabled new voices to come forward. The feedback was generally good, and the group work was particularly commented upon as an aid to inclusion. While some felt Iyengar yoga was already inclusive, and we didn't need the debate, others talked about the effects of discrimination in the yoga community on their health and wellbeing, about the dangers of assuming knowledge without asking; and how racial, gender and body stereotyping can create exclusion and prejudice. While a small number fed back that they would prefer the old PD Day format, the majority, found the new EL day approach helpful and would like to go on further this year, to explore how to make inclusion work in practice.

Equity and Reasonable Adjustment: Yoga for all Ages

As part of our 2024 – 2025 programme: Yoga for all Ages, we will look at inclusion through the lens of '**equity**' and '**reasonable adjustment**'. Small groups will come together to consider how we might adjust our teaching, planning and communication; e.g. the information we produce; the props and equipment we use; the environment we create within the general class / studio situation, to make access and inclusion possible.

The key to the day is how we develop, discuss and design, approaches that put the person at the heart of the solution. We will not be covering complex therapy situations. The day is suitable for all teachers, at all levels and everyone is welcome to contribute, as all of us are learning as we grow this process together.

This supplementary document is written to support the work, by giving some background information to help develop our skills in '**reasonable adjustment**', whether we are teaching regular classes, reaching out to new communities and individuals, mentoring a student, employing a colleague, or involved in assessing a candidate in an exam. Reasonable adjustment is an essential tool for each and every yoga teacher who is actively interested in developing inclusion.

What are the 9 Protected Characteristics¹?

In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 provides legal protection for nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. A family member/carer/friend who is closely associated with the disabled person is also protected. While socio-economic inequality has come to light as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, mental health, gender identity, neurodiversity, and social class are also areas of concern for social justice and inclusion. The Equality Act was created to stop discrimination and promote equality, but best practice goes beyond legal compliance.

“further things to consider include: accent, age, caring responsibilities, colour, culture, visible and invisible disability, gender identity and expression, mental health, neurodiversity, physical appearance, political opinion, pregnancy and maternity/paternity and family status and socio-economic circumstances, amongst other personal characteristics and experiences²

Why should education in diversity and inclusion matter to Yoga teachers?

UN Research shows that discrimination creates social exclusion, and has a profound affect on people’s wellbeing, opportunity, and sense of agency. Once the cycle of discrimination has started, it moves outwards, mounting up, to stop people from being heard, from belonging, and from contributing. Exclusion becomes embedded into every aspect of life, in our organisational structures, and in our body. The negative effects of discrimination are life-long, often beginning in childhood, with our parents and the suffering of previous generations. The effects on health, poverty, education, confidence, relationships, work, life expectancy are devastating.

We all need to be alert to the potential that one of our colleagues or students has a protected characteristic and will almost certainly experience some form of discrimination during their life in Iyengar yoga.

There can be a tendency to assume that there are no problems with inclusion when we have no direct experience of being excluded ourselves. When our community lacks diversity, we are simply not exposed to difference. Without difference, we do not have the channels, to hear or see, those with lived experience of discrimination, so we can’t

¹ Protected Characteristics under the [Equality Act 2010](#) are: age, gender reassignment, being married or in a civil partnership, being pregnant or on maternity leave, disability, race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. The Equality Act protects individuals from discrimination: at work; in education; as a consumer; when using public services; when buying or renting property; as a member or guest of a private club or association.

² <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/diversity/factsheet#6430>

actually say to those small numbers who have tried, that we have no problems with inclusion, because we simply do not know.

This touches us all, and is why the Equality Act was originally introduced. Those that do not suffer discrimination, often hold the power, and not by co-incidence, as our organisations and institutions were built upon social and structural inequality. The first step towards awareness, is to acknowledge that discrimination actually exists, because only then can we move towards positive change. As we seek understanding of how to recognise the causes within ourselves, and our institutions, we develop our humanity. This runs parallel with the yogic journey, as we live by the principles of yoga to direct us towards non-violence, and preventing harm happening to other people.

Stereotyping: why is it discriminatory?

Classes occur in a social context, and our relationships and communications are subject to unconscious bias. One way in which this manifests itself is in the way we discriminate against people through the use of stereotypes. These are a series of preconceived ideas and simplistic images deeply ingrained in our society, that have a negative influence on the way we see people, interact with them and treat them: for example on the basis of age, weight, occupation, skin colour, gender, etc. The effects of stereotyping are well documented, not only because they impose limitations upon us, but because they affect our mental health and development.

In the teaching situation, what the teacher says is learnt by other students in the class, so this directly affects relationship building amongst peers, and how others perceive that person. Essentially: a teacher is a powerful person, because pupils / students / and peers learn directly from them in how to speak, act and behave with others. By fostering and embedding anti-discrimination in yoga teaching, the teacher can become an ally in the necessary yogic work of social justice. A teacher has the power to bring the person into the group, through the environment they create, and be the custodian of inclusion. Equally, a teacher can isolate that person, often without awareness of what is happening. Stereotypes are at work, having undesirable effects on our personality development and the types of activities we do, as well as the way we live, the opportunities available to us and the careers we choose.

What if the cause of this discrimination is unconscious?

When do we know that we are discriminating against someone?

Well often we don't, because the psychology of unconscious bias shows us that if leaders don't want to hear it, they are less likely to look for it, and, even if they do, they are unlikely to see it.

How does the Equality Act Affect us as yoga teachers?

Under the Equality Act 2010, it is unlawful for any education, awarding body, or association, including any social or activity provider: whether public, private or independent, to discriminate between students on grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

Does Equality mean everyone gets the same? What is Equity?

Equality is the old idea of treating everyone the same, while equity means identifying the barriers that create inequality, and removing them to create equality. It's an active process of rebalancing the scales, to bring fairness, power and justice.

Equality, assumes that everyone is starting from the same point, and should be treated the same regardless of need. The problem here is that different cultural and social groups have been subject to historical, environmental, systemic, structural and other disadvantages. Ibram X. Kendi's books are a must read to build an understanding.

“Someone reproducing inequity through permanently assisting an overrepresented racial group into wealth and power is entirely different than someone challenging that inequity by temporarily assisting an underrepresented racial group into relative wealth and power until equity is reached. The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination.”³ Ibram X. Kendi

Kendi's thesis is simple: *“you are doing the work of anti-racism or contributing to it”*.

In setting out to give the same to all, we perpetuate disparity. Equity aims to build fairness by providing resources according to need.

So what has 'equity' got to do with Iyengar yoga teachers?

BKS Iyengar was a pioneer for 'equity'. He recognised that a group of students with only the floor to sit on, would not all get the same benefits from yoga practice. People were starting from different points. He saw that, and with adjustments, born from his own lived experience, practice and teaching, he invented the ways and means, to raise each person up to give them access to yoga. Literally through the careful use of props: the blanket, the bolster, the chair, the wall, the belt, the platform, each one could sit with the spine straight, adjusting according to constitution, age, pain, experience, culture, and the observation moment by moment through awareness. Where it was not possible to sit, he created the possibility of supine, each prop and method, a conduit of access to remove the barriers. All this was necessary for us to experience the essential yoga teachings of 'equality' in action, and see how 'equity' provided the means.

³ Ibram X. Kendi How to be An Anti Racist Bodley Head 2019.

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/440300/how-to-be-an-antiracist-by-kendi-ibram-x/9781529111828>

In this way ‘equity’ is a most important principle for us, and explains why ‘reasonable adjustment’ is enshrined in the law, as it is sometimes necessary to treat people ‘differently’ in order to provide everyone with an equal opportunity to succeed.

Equity is Reasonable Adjustment ⁴

Equality law recognises that bringing about equality may mean changing the way in which services are delivered. There is a legal ‘duty to make ‘reasonable adjustments’, under the law. For example, it is enshrined in the Equality Act 2010, that if you are a Disabled person, you can use an organisation’s services as close as it is reasonably possible to get to the standard usually offered to non-disabled people. If an organisation providing goods, facilities or services to the public or a section of the public, or carrying out public functions, or running an association finds there are barriers to Disabled people in the way it does things, then it must consider making adjustments (in other words, changes). If those adjustments are reasonable for that organisation to make, then it must make them. The duty is ‘anticipatory’. This means an organisation cannot wait until a Disabled person wants to use its services, but must think in advance (and on an ongoing basis) about what Disabled people with a range of impairments might reasonably need.⁵

What is Disability under the Equality Act?⁶

The Equality Act 2010 sets out when someone is considered to be disabled and protected from discrimination, this is important information and key to our understanding of where a person has a legal right to reasonable adjustment.

“A person has a disability if the person has a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out Day-to-day activities: these include – but are not limited to – activities such as walking, driving, using public transport, cooking, eating, lifting and carrying everyday objects, typing, writing (and taking exams), going to the toilet, talking, listening to conversations or music, reading, taking part in normal social interaction or forming social relationships, nourishing and caring for one’s self. They also encompass the activities related to working life. There is no need for a person to establish a medically diagnosed cause for their impairment. What it is important to consider is the effect of the impairment not the cause. Disability includes dyslexia, chronic fatigue, HIV mental ill-health and cancer treatment”⁷

⁴ <https://abilitynet.org.uk/workplace/what-are-reasonable-adjustments>

⁵ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/multipage-guide/using-service-reasonable-adjustments-disabled-people>

⁶ <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/work/discrimination-at-work/discrimination-at-work/checking-if-its-discrimination/check-if-youre-disabled-under-the-equality-act-work/>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010>

How can we practice reasonable adjustment in Iyengar yoga teaching?

We can build upon the principle of **'Equity'**.

Millions of people in this country suffer from discrimination every day, and do not get a fair or equal opportunity to fulfil their potential. Few people with a protected characteristic benefit from yoga, and we know discrimination creates social exclusion and health inequality. Yet for those that already benefit, there is possibly too much choice, and too few to fill what is available.

In the new Iyengar yoga system level 1 & 2 syllabus module 6, trainees are assessed on their knowledge of how to adjust their teaching to help students with **'health needs'** in general classes. This is reasonable adjustment in action. However, we need to go even further when considering the protected characteristics: as not all reasonable adjustments fall under the category of **'health needs'**.

There are also **'access needs'**; essentially removing barriers, to anything that would enable a disenfranchised person to fully participate in yoga and the yoga community. Including: personal practice, classes, online or in-person learning, teacher training, teaching, education, literature, to a mentor, and to a diverse range of teachers, at all stages of life, and to the inward journey, to participate fully as part of a social and cultural experience. Physical and emotional access; physical and emotional health; inside and outside the yoga class; all become intertwined.

We know that discrimination is **'lack of access'**, and it is happening all around us, before anyone enters the yoga class situation. As we develop our awareness of the barriers others face, that maybe still **'invisible'** to us, we awaken to the fact that discrimination is everywhere in our society, across race, age, gender, class, disability, across all the protected characteristics, and much more. This can become the springboard for development.

As the practice of reasonable adjustment grows, we consider how to create **'equity'** and **'access'**. They go hand in hand. For example: how to provide space for a student who needs their carer, or personal assistant? How to adjust options for submission formats, so that a Disabled trainee can complete an assignment, or access an assessment fairly? How the teaching environment might be adjusted for a Visually Impaired or Deaf student? How criteria could be adjusted for a teacher who is a fulltime carer. In each situation, the person is central to the solution-based approach.

Reasonable adjustment does not mean losing the integrity of the subject, or reducing the quality of what we are doing – far from it – equitable practice **is** our profession and **is** our teaching.

The ‘Social Model of Disability’⁸

The Social Model of Disability provides a useful tool to consider the question of **access**, and in this fascinating article by disability researcher Tom Shakespeare he describes the distinction between disability (social exclusion) and impairment (physical limitation)⁹.

The social model suggests, that disability occurs because of the way society is organised and that it presents numerous barriers, which prevent disabled people from being properly involved in community life. This includes discriminatory attitudes, inaccessible services and information, and physical barriers, such as the design of buildings, public transport, and education. The ‘Social Model of Disability’ states that the poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion experienced by many Disabled people is not the inevitable result of their impairments or medical conditions, but rather stems from attitudinal and environmental barriers within society. This view recognises that disabled people have impairments but, unlike the medical model of disability, the exclusion they experience, is caused by society not their individual impairments.

The debate is on going and Tom Shakespeare’s work helps us understand the complex interplay of individual and environmental factors in the lives of disabled people.

Inclusion is Participation

As we discuss strategies, share thought processes, knowledge, and techniques during the EL day, we adjust the situation together, creating an optimal learning and practice environment to help re-set the scales to promote inclusion. There is a lot of research out there, for example this interesting ladder of participation encapsulated in 3 things¹⁰

1. Influence:

this is a deliberate process to insure that the person who needs a reasonable adjustment is part of all aspects of the decision making process, and is not left out.

2. Representation:

deliberate efforts are made to reach a full representation of people, and to open up access routes, where the breadth of people’s experience is accounted for right across the protected characteristics. Efforts need to be made to engage with ‘people who are harder to reach”, before we can be sure we know what we are doing.

3. Quality:

the student / participant experience is likely to be the best indicator of quality engagement, so opportunities for feedback and evaluation should be built in.

⁸ <https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/social-model-of-disability/>

⁹ http://thedigitalcommons.org/docs/shakespeare_social-model-of-disability.pdf

¹⁰ A ladder of Citizen Participation Sherry Arnstein

<https://organizingengagement.org/models/ladder-of-citizen-participation/>

Concluding Question

How do we know what reasonable adjustments need making?

Essentially by asking.

Reasonable adjustment goes across all the protected characteristics, so it's a very important one for us. We do not have the answers, so listening to the people who are experts by experience is an essential tool for finding out. Best practice is to enter into a more empathic communication with the person who has the protected characteristic, working together with them to find out what reasonable adjustments they would like to be made, so that they can take ownership over a transparent process together with their teacher. As we co-produce the ways and means together, we begin to remove the social, economic, physical and environmental barriers to access Iyengar yoga. As we engage with individuals, we engage with their families and communities, we can begin to increase positive and diverse representation across all the protected characteristics.

Participation is one of the key principles, and we should not feel embarrassed at our lack of knowledge. As we remind ourselves not to forget to ask the person in front of us, we draw on lived experience. This helps us proceed towards a listening culture, where solutions are shared, and where we don't talk **about** people we talk **with** people.