

CASE STUDY

Claire Thorogood - Chair of Governors



Like many people, I felt a mix of horror and outrage at the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. But this time, it didn't feel enough.

It really brought home to me and to many, that racism isn't just an issue in the States, systemic racism is alive and well and thriving in the UK.

I think previously the UK has always let itself off the hook by being like, "well, we're not as racist as America, we're a multicultural society" but the events of last year showed that racism is part and parcel of the lived experience of people of colour here.

Particularly, as I'm also a chair of governors of a large girls' comprehensive school with large number of students of colour, the personal impact, and the extra weight of responsibility I felt was striking. It made me realise that if this has impacted so much on me as a white person, then what are the students of colour in our school feeling? If I feel that horror and outrage, what must they be feeling?'

As a school, it made us realise that we could no longer pretend that racism happens out there, but not within our school gates.

Taking a Stand

So, like other schools across the country, we decided to undertake wholesale work to try and address these issues on racial justice in our own context. As part of this, there was a review of the curriculum, uniforms, staff training and policies amongst other things.

The Headteacher herself was really on it but recognised that we had to do the deeper work. We didn't need a short-term action plan, but a fundamental shift in who we are as a school. Otherwise all those reviews can be kind of surface level – and so that if we're properly going to do this, we had to take things "right back".

So, after having spoken to Viv and Integrity Coaching, the Headteacher organised for her and her senior leadership team and me, as Chair of Governors, to undertake 1:1 Race Literacy Coaching with Viv.

Shifting paradigms

As a lawyer, a lot of my work is about is about mentally working through problems. People will bring you a problem and you take responsibility for delivering a legal and tactical solution. And so, my natural inclination is to identify the problem, then try and fix it. So I was thrilled to do the coaching as I saw it as an opportunity to do just that. I was going to play my part in fixing the problem.

However, one of the first and most important things I learned from Viv, was that this work isn't an intellectual endeavour, nor is it transactional and there are certainly no quick fixes.

Rather, it is relational and emotional – it is about feeling, listening, pausing, and reflecting (and embracing all the emotions that are brought up in the process) and all this takes time.

It is about learning to be able to put oneself into others' shoes and coming to a deeper understanding of them and their lived experience. As it was only when I had a better understanding of what those children and young people face, both in and out of school, could I start to "put things right".

However, whilst I am as someone who is, by nature, empathetic, it is a big leap to trying to put myself in the shoes of others who have had such a different experience of life. After all, I'm a 50-year-old white woman and I have spent the vast majority of my life in a kind of ignorance.

Starting with Self

I spent much of my life from where I went to school, where I grew up to my working environments, in heavily white dominated settings, in which I was part of the majority and the norm.

Looking back, I always viewed myself as a "good", white liberal for signing petitions, reading the Guardian, and going on marches but my insight into issues of race and racial justice was extremely limited. It was a well-meaning ignorance, but still ignorance (as you can be really willing, but you don't know what you don't know) and ultimately, this is not a very good starting point if you're going to really to work to try and undo racism.

I had read articles and listened to stories, but it's not the same as understanding racism and how it operates. You can read about microaggressions but it's not the same as experiencing and truly understanding them.

Viv explained that before I could put myself in others' shoes, first I needed to understand where and how my own socialisation has led me to in term of forming my attitudes, my behaviours and indeed, the person I am today. It's about starting with yourself and understanding who you are and your own racial identity as a white person and working outwards.

Unless you understand who you are, how can you hope to understand anything outside of yourself or put yourself in someone else's shoes.

Increasing Personal Awareness

Over the course of the coaching, Viv helped me to understand that there's a societal racial context to everyone we meet, and mine is likely to be often very different from theirs. After all, my experience as a white woman is different from a white man's. My experience as a white straight woman is different from, LGBTQI+ individuals. We've all gone through different journeys and so coaching creates a very safe space for you to explore yourself and your racial identity, and what that means in terms of how you show up as a person and in your role.

Through her coaching, she encouraged me to examine my own behaviour, and attitudes which had been formed through my race socialisation. This probably sounds very challenging but the way it's done, it is actually very gentle and not judgmental at all.

For example, one of the best things that I learnt from coaching is that I need to listen more. Viv really helped me appreciate this as I discussed with her a planned interaction with some colleagues of colour. As part of the session, we were exploring how I'd go about managing that meeting and what I'd say.

I was explaining all the things I had planned to speak on and the offers of help I would make. I don't know how Viv managed to do it, because she certainly wasn't critical in anyway or judgmental but through her coaching, she said something along the lines of:

"Would you not like to hear their views? After all, you've invited them to join the meeting, would you not like to hear from them?"

Through further discussion, I was able to come to realise that whilst thought I was being incredibly helpful and friendly in my approach – I would actually be assuming all the power in the room (by doing all the talking) and trying to have all the answers. That was quite a revelation for me and has led me to listen more.

As part of the coaching, I was also provided with a number of materials and think-pieces designed to help me think about and explore issues around race in very different ways, but again this is less of thinking exercise, and more of a feeling and relationship thing.

A Fundamental Shift

One of the things we noticed by the end of the sessions, was that when I first had my sessions with Viv, my note taking was prolific, I was trying to get down everything she said, worrying that I'd forget it all if I didn't. Again, I was treating it as an intellectual endeavour.

But towards the end of the sessions, I wasn't making as many notes as I realised it wasn't a test – I wasn't to be quizzed on the meaning of certain words or the right thing to say in certain situations, it was about a much more fundamental shift in well... as I said, feelings.

This fundamental shift for me was so valuable in my role as Chair of Governors as working with Integrity Coaching, my school is also undertaking their Race, Identity and School Leadership programme.

This programme is a key part of what we are doing to help become an anti-racist school, where all our students feel able to bring their whole selves to the school, to feel that they belong and can thrive there.

I know that whilst I would have felt committed to this anti-racist work, this shift that coaching elicited in me has made me more passionate about making this happen. It has helped me to become a more anti-racist individual, i.e., someone that actively disrupts racism.

Whilst I would've been extremely well-intentioned to support our school leaders in their efforts to transform our school into a truly anti-racist school, I would have felt far less equipped to do so. The coaching has also enabled me to be better at listening to our school leaders who are doing this work, and indeed others who are trying to create anti-racist cultures in their own contexts.

A Process of Transformation

Without all the work Integrity Coaching has done with us, we might have thought of more quick fixes to make everyone feel better. But that wouldn't have led us to create a fairer place for students of colour within the school environment, in the way that Viv has helped make possible. The work is on-going – and constant vigilance is needed to ensure that changes introduced are embedded and sustained.

On a personal level, I would say the coaching has been truly life-changing. I work as an employment lawyer and so I've done a lot of discrimination work, but the work with Viv has made me more passionate about the kind of the work I could do in this area.

So since doing the coaching, I've applied for and been accepted to do a part time Masters and I hope to work eventually as a Chief Diversity Officer.

That's totally thanks to Integrity Coaching, that I am now making that shift as the coaching with Viv has inspired me; that I can try to bring about wider change with regards to racial justice and hopefully make a difference .