

## CASE STUDY

### Kathryn Pugh - Headteacher

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**Our school is a really thoughtful, dynamic, exciting place to work and learn. We serve a very diverse community; we always have done.**

I joined the school in 2005 as a Teacher of English. When I joined, I thought to myself, “This school’s amazing. We have students of all different backgrounds, with so many different languages spoken. We have multi-cultural celebrations, we celebrate diversity through dance and music and many subjects and activities ... ” etc.

So, when in 2020, we were confronted with the idea that actually we haven’t done enough, that we weren’t doing everything we could be doing to serve our community and be an anti-racist school, as Headteacher, proud of our diversity and service, it was a very hard pill to swallow.

Even up to a couple years ago, if somebody had said or even implied that part of the way we do things as a school was racist, I’d have recoiled in defensive horror. I wouldn’t have known where to put myself, except for probably being quite embarrassingly defensive about it.

Yet looking back now, whilst we would absolutely do our best to deal with incidents around race if and when they occurred and did lots to celebrate racial and cultural diversity – in truth, we hadn’t done any deep work to tackle racism and the tensions that may lie under the surface in our school, that were going unspoken.

A number of us (including me) had worked with Integrity Coaching before. I knew that they would perfect to help us address this.

### Looking Inwards

As we knew from our work with Integrity before, the nature of the work would have to start with the core of who we are as human beings, that it wouldn’t be a half-hearted exploration around the periphery of these issues.

And so in November 2020, we started on their “Race, Identity and School Leadership” programme.

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Going into it, our hope was that the programme would help us address our ignorance and help us find solutions, but we also understood that it wasn't going to be a tick box exercise. We knew that there would be no quick answers and we'd have to do internal work before we could do the external work.

Doing this in schools is often forgotten. In the pace and fury of operational challenges that we face day-to-day, as school leaders and as people, we can skip over the internal work needed to lead brilliantly.

But this can also be very hard as staff, students, governors all wanted to know what actions we were taking and wanted to see the change now. It was challenging having to push back and say, "I'm not going to give you quick fixes," and to hold the line and say, "the inner learning is the most important thing at the moment."

At times some of us hoped that there'd be some magic lists that would appear of "do this", "don't do that."

But instead, what the programme asked us to do was to discuss things and properly lean into conversations about race for the first time. We're a very tight team anyway and so not afraid of having open conversations, but this encouraged us to discussions we'd never had before or perhaps never would have done.

## Leaning into the uncomfortable spaces

By leaning into these challenging conversations, we were able to develop our racial literacy and start to feel increasingly comfortable and confident in uncomfortable conversations about race. By talking about these issues openly and honestly, the fear of "getting it wrong" began to subside.

This is vital, because if you don't have confidence, you can be so frightened of getting it wrong and being called racist, that you end up actually being racist or at least, failing to properly address the issues. Or you can try so hard to "get it right", that you end up getting it wrong.

The programme content also helped us to build a far greater understanding of what it means to be an anti-racist school and become more racially informed. As a team, it encouraged us to develop new anti-racist ways of thinking and ways of working as a team. For example, we now view everything through the diversity or anti-racist lens, which has become a valuable habit.

On the programme, we also did some live coaching and we were able to bring specific examples into the sessions with Viv and unpack them using coaching and work out how we'd resolve them. This was so helpful. You can understand the theory and do all the thinking, but you still need to know how to apply that when you're faced with it in the pressure of a 55-minute lesson, 30 students in the room, or faced with a parent saying "act"!

Through exercises like this and the learning on the programme, I would say my colleagues and I now have a better understanding of how and when to act, and we are more able to support teachers and students alike, when it comes to tackling issues around race. We are still learning and the work is by no means all done but we now know this territory better and know it is land we must inhabit.

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For example, one of my colleagues in the safeguarding team shared a story of them having a conversation with a student, who had behaved inappropriately at school.

In the middle of the conversation with the student, who was a young black student, the student said “oh well, that’s just racist.” And the two members of staff who work in that team said, had that comment been made a two years ago, their response would have been quite different.

They’d have been straightaway quite defensive, but instead they responded by saying, “Okay, that’s interesting, tell me more about that?” which led to a very different, open and productive conversation and outcome in that situation and their relationship with the student.

## Developing as a team

Perhaps one of the best things about the programme which could be an overlooked benefit, is that doing this sort of CPD together has value in terms of team development and leadership effectiveness.

Over the last year or so, due to the pandemic, we’ve faced every possible challenge to team cohesion: we’ve been fragmented, separated and not been able to be in the same room while adapting to numerous unpredictable operational challenges and threats to community cohesion.

As part of the programme, we had so many deep and personal conversations about race, about ourselves, and the stories that have formed our understanding of our own race and identity.

Through this professional dialogue, we learned to better understand one another, who we are as a team and our common goals. This has brought us closer together and what better context for this than combating racism?

## Keeping race a priority

The journey we went on as part of the programme took place over 12 months, but over what was an incredibly challenging 12 months for school leaders.

At the same time that we undertook the course with Viv, we ran eight different versions of school operations because of COVID.

At various stages on the programme, we were all completely exhausted by trying to run everything online, managing safeguarding, students’ mental health, staff wellbeing, adapting to changes to DfE guidance and navigating a way forward. Amidst all that, it would’ve been very easy to let race and equality slip down the list of priorities.

But I’m so glad we didn’t let this happen. It was always worth the time commitment and it has been so important on our journey towards becoming a truly anti-racist school.