

## CASE STUDY

### **Rick Clarke - Headteacher**

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Like most schools and organisations across the UK and beyond, myself and our school community were very much affected George Floyd's death in 2020, the resulting Black Lives Matter movement and the whole worldwide condemnation of the events that took place.

Like many schools, the events led us to re-examine what was happening in society, what we were doing, and how we were relating to each other.

As a school, we'd always said that we absolutely don't tolerate racism and I'd like to think that openness and transparency and generosity, are in many ways some of the defining features of our school. Yet demographically, as a school, we are overwhelmingly white, we only have a handful of students of colour and just one staff member who's mixed race.

Looking back now, I would say we probably also hadn't always approached race, in the most honest way, despite of our culture of openness.

But after George Floyd's death, when the discussion about how organisations should respond become more pronounced that changed. We almost immediately started having a lot of conversations, engaging with our students and with our parents about these issues, who asked us a number of questions such as:

- **How's the school going to respond?**
- **What are you going to do about this?**
- **What's your position on race?**
- **How we began to chart a way forward**

There were some calls for us to examine what we teach and why. In particular, there was a very conflicted debate around some of our curriculum content, 'why are you teaching this? Why don't you teach this? Could you approach this, for example, a different way?

There was also a big debate about the texts we teach, and about censorship more broadly. For example, we were teaching English texts from 100 years ago, that had some very explicit racism in them and so some thought we shouldn't be teaching them anymore.

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But on the other hand – we had others who said “No, hang on, that’s part of history and our students need to understand where we’ve come from to know where we’re going.” And then, if we do start censoring texts, how far should we go with this?

On top of this, literally about a month before George Floyd’s death – we had had an incident in school that we were still struggling to unpick, involving some of our younger children. Whilst in the past, when there had been clear examples of racism, it had been easy to act and you could send a clear message that this is our view on it; this is the stance we have taken.

But then with cases like this, one which was far more nuanced and complicated, it was a lot harder. We also know that as an educational institution, we had a responsibility to help re-educate children, rather than simply kicking them out for making mistakes.

## Recognising the Complexities Involved

With all these questions, discussions and issues building up – I felt we needed to respond. But the more we discussed and explored these issues, the more conscious I was of the complexity of them. At the same time, I was also determined to get it right. We needed to do something, but we needed to do it well.

I also wanted to avoid any virtue signalling. I didn’t want to suddenly say, ‘oh yeah, we do this and that.’ Instead, I wanted us to think, ‘right, what are we doing? What are the conversations we need to have? Where do we take this? What’s the best thing to do?’.

And so in order to navigate the right way through this process, I thought I could do with some support and help on this and so I reached out to Viv Grant at Integrity Coaching.

What struck me in talking to Viv was that there are a number of approaches you can take when tackling these issues around race. Her approach made me realise that the work on race started with me personally. After all, if I’m leading my school and leading on this work, I need to do so in the right way and know that it was coming from my heart.

I was also aware of my background, being a white, South African – that I’ve got my own history, my own upbringing when it comes to race, my own experiences to unpick and so after great deal of reflection – I knew it was the right thing to do to engage with this work in a meaningful, really personal way. And so, following my conversation with Viv, I started working undertaking some Race Literacy Coaching with one of Integrity Coaching’s associates, Mark Bisson.

## Developing a Trusting 1:1 Relationship

With Mark, I was able to quickly develop a really open, trusting dialogue, in which there was there was no judgement. I found this is so helpful, because race is an area where people can feel uncomfortable and fearful of making mistakes and saying the wrong thing.

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But with Mark, I knew that if I was going to express things, sometimes clumsily, I wouldn't be judged for it because he knew my heart was in the right place. If I was expressing the challenges I was facing and feeling conflicted, again, I wouldn't be judged. He was able to help guide me through these challenges and find the right words, using a skilled coaching approach.

I was able to say for example, "I'm not sure how to respond to this parent who has this particular view" and rather than him saying 'right, Rick, I think you should do this' – instead helped me arrive at the answers, allowed me to understand the different perspectives and find the right way through. This was particularly invaluable since as a Headteacher you're effectively at the top of the organisation, you don't always have people you can be open with in this way.

What was great about Mark was that he was also really open with me. It wasn't as if he was expecting me to be to share personal things about my own history, and not do the same himself. He was able to model the vulnerability needed to properly explore this work.

He'd say, 'well, these, this is a journey I've been on these are experiences I've had, this is what I learned from it, you can take from that what you will'. For me, that was really helpful to hear, as I think it made me more comfortable and prepared to open up as well.

To support the coaching relationship, Integrity Coaching provided some reading material around race and identity. Some of these think-pieces were really challenging and pushed me to think about things in very different ways.

If I had just read them though, I don't think it would have been on the same journey I did. But with Mark, I had someone with whom I could explore and discuss together. If there were ever bits I found challenging with the pieces, things that I didn't understand, I could seek some guidance on that – as well as someone with whom I could share my thoughts, reflections and ideas with.

The coaching also helped me to reflect on my own background, my upbringing and my racial identity, which is essential because if you're not thinking about these things – then you may well be failing to notice your own preconceptions, prejudices or biases.

## Developing a Deeper Self-Understanding

With a coach you've got someone who's reflecting what you're saying, is perhaps spotting and picking these things up and saying, 'I'm hearing this' or 'Okay, well, I hear this, but have you thought about this?'

This is so useful as I think we've all got blind spots and we've all gone through life in particular ways which may have blinded us to our own biases and prejudices, or not allowed us to understand things from other perspectives.

For example, before the programme, whilst I had come across the concept of "white privilege" but I don't think I ever really understood what it meant in practice and how it feels for a black person to think about that in those terms. And I don't think you can until you really have this sort of dialogue. Ultimately, I think

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the coaching I've had with Mark has been really transformative and the fact that I did this work has been really well received by my staff, the students and by the parents alike.

It has also opened up new opportunities. For example, I'm now engaging with a black parent and we are currently planning for a public dialogue with one another around race and identity. As part of this, we will be talking in front of an audience about our race, our different identities, our different stories, our different experiences – but also how we can connect in spite of these differences, which I think could be quite a powerful thing. If it hadn't been for the coaching I received, it's very unlikely that I'd have had the confidence to do that.

And so, I would strongly recommend this coaching to any leaders in roles like mine, who are leading organisations through this territory or indeed any leaders who are committed to supporting, helping and doing their best for staff and pupils of all backgrounds in their schools.