

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond. We're joined by Dr Kathryn Kashyap for this week's episode who has spent 30 years working with children and young people from a range of diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds. Kathryn is now a school improvement advisor and is talking to us today about her work on racial justice and decolonising the school curriculum. So, without further ado, a very warm welcome Kathryn.

Dr Kathryn Kashyap: Thank you. Nice to be with you.

Cllr Millard: How are you?

Kathryn: I'm good. Thank you, yes.

Cllr Millard: Good! It would be great to kick things off, if you could give us a better understanding of what your current role is.

Kathryn: OK, thank you, so school improvement advisor means that I am here to help schools with a range of different things. I do sort bespoke work with individual schools looking at their practice, either on racial justice or multilingualism or disadvantage. I've got three very different roles there. Obviously, the racial justice and multilingualism tie in very closely together. So, it's a really exciting job. I absolutely love it to be honest with you.

Cllr Millard: It sounds fantastic, yeah, thank you. Thank you and I understand in your earlier career you taught English for 10 years in London schools and you have a wealth of experience supporting refugee pupils. Could you tell us a bit more about this and how it led to your role now?

Kathryn: Sure yeah, I have to say I was thinking about this that I swore at the age of 18 that I would never be a teacher and it took me 12 years to give in, but I did finally become teacher. Having done TEFL actually. So, when I started teaching in Wandsworth in a large comprehensive in Wandsworth, very diverse because I've done TEFL, I was given a bit of responsibility for EAL pupils within the department I then went off and taught in a different school for a couple of years and then came back to be head of what was then called ethnic minority achievement and my role there was very specifically on EAL and refugee young people and the deputy head led on all the aiming high stuff that was going on then for black achievement. But of course, it all cross fertilises and links in together and when I started that role, I happened to have a group of both Somali and Afghan refugees who arrived straight from their different countries who had had hugely disrupted education and they didn't read and write in their home languages particularly the Somali young people, and we basically learned together over four years how to get them through. And I left when the first lot, had just done their GCSEs. I spent a lot of time working across the curriculum with a range of teachers supporting how they taught in mainstream, and we also had to teach these young people to read and write. So as a secondary school English teacher, I had to learn phonics, which has stood me in

incredibly good stead. I have to say, particularly now, working with primary schools as well. We used to close the door. They'd always say Miss close the door because they would be chanting the phonics and they didn't want anyone else to hear. But what was really amazing - I still remember - once we had taught them phonics. We then actually got to Somali teacher to come and teach the children Somali. So, children, young people who just spoken their language all their lives. Suddenly were learning how to read and write it as well. And that was absolutely incredible. And we did a range of community languages. We did Arabic. We did Pashto, all the different languages so that children really felt empowered in their language as well, as well as learning in English.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic, thank you. And when it comes to the work you're doing then now, that has led into that and what you know talking about decolonising the school curriculum. What exactly do we mean by that and how do you go about trying to achieve this?

Kathryn: I think I I'm going to quote from Sabrina Edwards here, so we've had a range of different speakers come in and help us with this work and she says three very important words. She says: rethink, reframe and reconstruct knowledge so it's very much not about adding in things. It's about looking at what we are teaching and even more importantly how we are teaching it and thinking about that completely differently. Almost turning it on its head and challenging that idea that we are focused solely on sort of Europe, UK, monolingual, British idea of the world and instead thinking OK, you know which knowledge is actually legitimate here, you know who's got the capital? How are we excluding whole reams of the world by the way that we focus on things? So, it's challenging. I think it's difficult. I think it produces uncomfortable conversations about race and racism. I think looking at the whole school curriculum, particularly I've been looking at primary curriculums recently, you find even looking at one scheme of work unless you understand migration, slavery and colonialism, you can't actually teach anything. It actually impacts everything, it impacts art, it impacts geography. You know it impacts English and you know, for example in art, in the primary curriculum you will find, for example, African art in early years and then it pops up again in year five. And there's nothing in between and the artists who are being studied are as key artists are all from European and Western backgrounds. None are from African Heritage, Asian heritage, etc. So, that message that we give to our children is pretty stark actually, you know? So, starting to unpick that and starting to turn it on its head is really important. I think the second thing I would say is the how. So, as a teacher, you know I could give you, I don't know something about Mary Seacole and Florence Nightingale to teach, but unless I'm actually trained in how I approach that, how I talk about those two women, how I compare or don't compare them. Actually again, the message is not going to get across. I can very easily, you know, present Florence Nightingale as this wonderful sort of white saviour. And Mary Seacole as somebody who sort of happened to come along as well. Do you see what I mean? So, it's not just about what you put in the curriculum, it's about how we teach it and that for us as teachers is about our own self-reflective practice. It's about us learning all the time.

Cllr Millard: Wow, yes that well there's a lot to think about you. Are you really made me think because I'd assumed that the main bit was going to be about history teaching? I guess perhaps you know, that might be the most rich and ready for sort of rethinking and reassessment. But you're saying, it stretches across the whole curriculum?

Kathryn: It has to go across the whole curriculum to have the impact it needs to have exactly, and I think what's really interesting is that, for example, choosing what books children read is something that that our English advisor has done a lot of work on over last couple of years but you know, I spoke to apparently other day who said to me, you know that the only book that my child had brought home that had a black character in was a book about sport, so that you know that that thing again about where OK we can see oh goodness yes, got to be diverse in what books we have. But what messages are we sending through the books we actually choose is vital and it makes a massive difference to a family of African heritage or Caribbean heritage. You know what are their children seeing in the in the books that they read because we have to keep challenging assumptions, we have to keep challenging those stereotypes. So yeah, it's a huge amount of work and I think what's really important for schools is that it's OK to start small and it's OK to start with one thing I think if you think about the whole thing, you could be overwhelmed and I think particularly at the moment, with schools you know facing a lot of challenges, but starting that journey it is really important. And sharing together what we're doing is vital, I think.

Cllr Millard: Yes, yes, and I hear that you were touching on it there. What are the harms for people seeing things presented when it hasn't been decolonised?

Kathryn: So, it's very much about who I am as a learner I think is the key thing. So, if I feel marginalised and I feel almost ostracised by the fact that my own knowledge, my own understanding of the world, my own experiences that are not represented in what I'm learning, and what I'm seeing, that pushes me to the margins. It makes me feel that I'm not. I don't belong. I'm not a valued, recognised member of society. Now, a lot of young people push back. You know, that's not to say that they stay at the margins at all, but actually that that sense of being sort of positioned as a second rate, as in the hierarchy, it is really strong, really strong.

Cllr Millard: Yes, and you're talking very eloquently about how important it is to protect people in ethnic minorities from the toxic effects of those sort of embedded, outdated concepts that are unconsciously embedded, it sounds to me, within sort of things that we teach. The debate about this sort of thing since the terrible situation with George Floyd's murder and Black Lives Matter movement coming to the fore, as with so many political issues that you know the debate has been quite divisive. Social media tends to push the extreme views, and there's been an attempt by the far right to sort of portray things as woke, and for that to be a derogatory word. What do you say to people who feel worried that you know that you're taking away teaching things about British history? What it means to be British? How can you reassure them that this isn't about that? And what would you say to people who would perhaps seek to dismiss this sort of thing as wokery?

Kathryn: It depends on what you mean by British, doesn't it?

Cllr Millard: Yes.

Kathryn: So, if you look at our nation, who are we as British people? If you look at the history of our migration. My mother's family is from Yorkshire, probably Vikings. My dad's family is from Essex, and heaven only knows where they came from, they were pirate smugglers. But you know, I think we have to embrace that, that this this sort of notion of Britain, as some sort of like little island full of white people is just complete nonsense. So, if you look at the world as you know, just this, this amazing diversity of different people who move across nations across continents over centuries over millennia, I think that's an incredibly exciting way to look at the world. So, I don't think it's being woke, it's actually looking at the reality.

What I'd like to add to that is the legacy of slavery and the legacy of colonialism, and I don't think we can ignore that and say, well that's nothing to do with us now. I think we all have a moral imperative that we have to address the huge inequalities and the suffering that has been produced by that and is still produced by that today. So that whole dealing with racial trauma, dealing with generational trauma due to slavery etc. is vital and also the consequences of how we treated the Windrush generation as well. We all have a responsibility to address that, you know?

Cllr Millard: Well said, absolutely. And I think we have to be clear that if we on the one hand you know are quite clear and happy to say that we agree that slavery was a bad thing, then we should be happy to talk about it, not brush under the carpet. You know, that's the bottom-line and this seems to be a conversation, we're only really having now. Even though slavery was abolished quite a long time ago.

Kathryn: Exactly, and it's very interesting isn't it, when you look at the portrayal of who, for example, finished slavery and the whitewashing of that, and we all know about William Wilberforce, we don't know about the black leaders, who actually made substantial gains in that area. Often people are quite anxious about how to talk about race and racism because I think it has been a conversation that hasn't been had. I would say for the last 10/12 years very much, and I think starting to get people confident that it's OK to have uncomfortable conversations like I'm having with you now. You know as I'm talking, I think, oh, goodness, I should say that, oh I haven't said this. You know it's actually really important we say the right things but practicing these conversations and having them I think is so important because otherwise children still learn about race and racism but not in an open way.

Cllr Millard There's so much colonial history in this borough. That's one of the things I wanted to say yeah, because you know you've got all these sort of grand houses that you know were built in Georgian times. You know even things like street names come up and people want to talk about that sort of thing as well. Basically, what I've learned only in the last few years is it when you look at somewhere like Marble Hill House. Just sort of go right I probably know how that was paid for. It wasn't just rum. We were always told it was rum and sugar. But there's a third trade that wasn't mentioned. And that's just got to change. Does that come into your work at all?

Kathryn: Yeah, I mean the whole point the curriculum is that it has to be embedded in the local context, so you know that would be fascinating. To get some schools to do some projects on the colonial history of Richmond, that would be amazing.

Cllr Millard: Yes no. Absolutely. And we were talking decolonialising the curriculum, but then also implementing anti-racist approaches. How does this work?

Kathryn: So, decolonising the curriculum is only one strand of the whole approach, and the course that we've just developed, which I'm very excited to be advertising to schools now actually has seven different sections to it, and that's only really scratching the surface. But basically, we need to look at how our policies as well as our practices are anti-racist across the board, so you have to have a really strong racism policy obviously and racist bullying policy. But actually, if you just have that sitting on a shelf somewhere and you don't look at the rest of your policies then you're not going to get very far. So, a really silly in some ways example, but it's not silly actually is, your behaviour policy and that includes for example your uniform policy, so my Muslim girls in school would always get into trouble because they wore a long sleeve top underneath their T shirts in the summer. OK so always in massive trouble for this being told off etc. Why? Why can't we just have long tops? Yeah, that is a simple way in which actually we are embracing everybody. We are not setting up barriers, making people feel excluded, making people feel that their own practices, their own beliefs are somehow second rate, yeah? So, there's a range of different things there, and I think particularly behaviour policies are really crucial. And often what you find is that black children, young people are told off more frequently. There's all sorts of ways that that that people like me as a white teacher need to really reflect on in terms of how I'm addressing behaviour. You know, how am I calling somebody out all the time or not? How am I drawing on their strengths?

Cllr Millard: It's been fascinating, and really, I'm very grateful to you for talking about everything that you're doing, which is so important and a big thank you. Is there anything else you want to share as we come towards the end of this podcast?

Kathryn: No. I mean, I think I'd like to just encourage people who are listening, parents, children, young people to get involved and to talk with their schools about what they're doing and to offer their help and support. And I think I think the more we work on this together, the more strength it has and the more power it has to make positive changes. And so, yeah, thank you very much for the opportunity. It's been really great talking to you.

Cllr Millard: The work Kathryn is doing and hopes to achieve with our local schools is so important. It's been really fascinating to hear more about it, so thank you so much. Racism remains a huge problem in our society as we've heard, the effects of it in our school can be very toxic for people experiencing it. It's something that everyone needs to be prepared to feel uncomfortable about to challenge ourselves. We may not think that we're exhibiting any form of racism, but the extent to which it's embedded in things that people have taken for granted as part of our culture and the way that we teach needs to be looked at. We need to address that. Otherwise, we're part of the problem. As always, if you have enjoyed it, please do like and subscribe. And if you're on the sort of service where you can do this, please do leave a review. Hope to get top marks and no scribbled notes in the margin. My name is Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.

