
September 2022

Nash Mills is a single-form entry, Church of England primary school, located on the edge of Hemel Hempstead. There are currently 228 pupils on roll. The school serves a diverse community and, at the beginning of this project, 13% of pupils were eligible for pupil premium, 22% were registered as using English as an additional language (with 16 different languages being spoken) and 27% considered vulnerable. The school has seen these numbers begin to rise following the Covid-19 pandemic and increases to the cost of living.

17 different ethnic backgrounds are represented, including Black African, Indian, Pakistani and White Asian. 52% of the population consider themselves to be Christian and 11% Muslim. There are also pupils who are Jewish, Sikh or Hindu. 23% have no reported religion.

Being about to embark on the Great Representation programme, we considered as a school what we hoped to get from the sessions – something that was not yet clear. There is no denying that there is racism and cultural misrepresentation in wider society, and in our first session, we were provided with some hard facts, which included:

- **the difference in attainment at all key stages between different cultural groups – White children outperforming many other groups most of the time throughout the education system**
- **that young Black people were nine times more likely to be stopped and searched than White young people**
- **that in 2019, 24% Bangladeshi young people were unemployed, compared with 10% young White people**

As the day went on, we heard from several speakers who shared their reflections and experiences – deeply personal experiences – about how, even today, they were being treated differently and even abused due to the colour of their skin.

How could we make a tangible difference to this in our small school? As a senior leadership team, we know that there are books in each classroom that represent different cultures, we know that the curriculum offers some learning around these cultures, and we know that our policy says that we do not tolerate any form of racism. But the first day made us think about some important questions:

- **What does that really mean?**
- **What is the lived experience of our pupils?**

- **If we were going to change, how could this be more than carrying out tokenistic one-off actions?**
- **How could change make a meaningful, lasting difference?**

We owe it to all of our children to do what we can, but this would not be a clear journey. As cited by Agarwal in the book *Wish We Knew What to Say*, “These are the people who are going to inherit this world, and we owe it to them to lay a strong foundation for the next phases of their lives.” From those who offered their very personal and deep-rooted experiences at the seminar, one thing became very clear: how personal and individual this is. Individual to the person, individual to each culture and individual to each specific ethnic background within our community. From this, we realised how important it was that those most affected were the ones who were empowered to have control and steerage around the work to be done; “anti-racism work is not something ‘done to’, but rather ‘done with’” (Miller, P, “Equity in Education & Society”, 2022).

As a Church of England school, we teach our pupils the skill of courageous advocacy, helping them to feel they can challenge and question social and moral norms, see disparity, and have the “fire in their bellies” to do something about it. We also have a set of values that are threaded through everything we do, linked to the parable of the Good Samaritan. Our children learn to be empathetic, to see each other for who they are and to respect this, to look out for others, and to be prepared to step in and help others who are in need. We felt that this stood us in good stead for the work to come.

We needed a concrete, supportive and clear plan, and to ensure that pupils had enough of a voice to feel they could make a difference. From the day, we came up with a plan to begin working towards this:

1. To create a focus group in school, consisting of pupils, staff and governors. A colleague on the course had already done this and offered to help. The plan: an open invitation to a cluster, where key ideas could be discussed. Does our community feel that they are all reflected within our curriculum? Do they see themselves in what we do? From this, how could we engage with the wider school community to gain their views and ideas?
2. We also recognise that this highly emotive subject can be difficult for staff to address and discuss. During the first day, the idea of White fragility was discussed. How well prepared do staff feel in addressing and confronting these issues with confidence? We needed to implement training and provide discussion time.
3. What else could be done within our curriculum? We know that different cultures are represented through some of our subjects, but is this the case across our curriculum? And is it done explicitly enough that it is recognised by the pupils? A question we had from the day, which we hoped would become clear later, was how we could find the balance between teaching the definite facts within our curriculum

whilst not over-politicising with opinion. This was something that we agreed would present some challenges moving forward.

From day one, we had a plan.

October 2022

Getting the children involved

We held our first Great Representation pupil meeting, asking for children from Years 5 and 6 to join us as an open invitation. The turnout was impressive, and it was clear that the children were interested by and intrigued about the content of the meeting. We opened the discussion by explaining that the team would be involved in helping to make an agreed terminology of how we describe ourselves and others, and would help with the development of our positive behaviour policy to ensure we promote an anti-racist ethos in our school.

The first meeting showed how clearly our children believe in the current ethos of the school. Many times, when the children were asked how they would describe someone of a different race, they would answer that it didn't matter what colour you were – we are all equal and should all be treated equally. The children kept coming back to this point and, at times, were quite adamant that they didn't need to move beyond this. We posed the question to children about how they would describe themselves in terms of race. Some said that they identify as Black. We wrote some of their words down and asked if they were all represented. Two girls said they could be Brown. It was interesting to see that two of the girls who were Indian and Asian did not know what adjective they would use to describe themselves or what their parents would identify as.

We asked the children if “coloured” was an appropriate descriptor; we are various colours – red when hot, bluish when cold, etc. The children pondered, and one girl reflected that she might have used that adjective to describe a Black person when younger but would now probably not.

From the discussion, we collected certain terms and shared what pupils thought we might look at next. From this, we created the “tagline” of our project: We DECIDE

We **DECIDE**

At Nash Mills, we show:

Diversity, Equality, Celebration, Inclusion, Difference, Empathy

Towards the end of the month, we visited Longdean School as part of the project. One activity we engaged in during the visit was to hear from students who made up the school's LEAD (Longdean Equality and Diversity) steering group. The group was established in the school two years ago. The students spoke with incredible passion and clarity, and a real sense of ownership of the work completed by them. This was truly inspirational and gave us a real aim for an output of our work: for our pupils to have similar purpose and skill, albeit at a primary level.

November 2022

Stakeholder voice and planning for change

The initial conversations held with pupils confirmed that they felt safe in school and were keen to share their views and reflections. Hearing the range of views that the children held proved to us that we couldn't rely on preconceptions and that, to gain a deeper understanding, we needed to talk to a range of people. From listening to the range of speakers during the days on the Great Representation programme, and reading books such as *Wish We Knew What to Say* by Dr Pragya Agarwal, *Black and British* by David Olusoga, and *My Name Is Why* by Lemn Sissay, it was becoming clear that we knew less about inclusivity than we'd initially thought.

The most straightforward way to gain initial feedback was to create a set of surveys, followed up by discussion groups. The questionnaires were created and sent to parents, staff and governors, using an online tool that they were all familiar with. We also sought the views of pupils through class-based discussion and focus groups.

Generally, the responses were pleasing. Most respondents felt that pupils at Nash Mills were offered equal opportunities, regardless of need or background, with 92% agreeing. There was the same level of response to a question that asked if the school celebrated diversity, although fewer respondents strongly agreed.

Staff were asked to consider how well different groups were represented within the curriculum, most being able to identify a range of examples. However, there was less certainty in reference to people from a pan-Asian background. Staff felt that diversity was represented well in subject areas such as English, RE, PSHE, history and geography, but less well in computing, maths, science and PE. Parents were much less sure about this point, with only 56% saying that they felt well informed about the curriculum content. Parents and staff also felt that having greater ethnic diversity amongst the visitors to school and role models within the curriculum would help pupils to "see themselves" better reflected. These suggestions were also made by some classes.

There was no doubt that we needed to spend some time looking at how the curriculum represented our children, but perhaps a greater focus was needed on how we helped our pupils and parents to see this; were we being too discreet in this area, whilst trying not to make a “big deal” of it? When we visited Longdean School through the project, it was really clear how the school had gone some way to developing this area – pictures, case studies and quotes from those representing a range of backgrounds were clearly displayed throughout the school. Could this be something we could do? Although, how would we do this without overloading the curriculum?

Almost all adults who responded said that they would be confident in talking to pupils about a range of different issues. There were some comments about not wanting to use the wrong words to describe different groups, and needing to know where to go for further information; a shared space to help with this may be useful.

All respondents felt that the school protected those from different backgrounds well. The vast majority said that they knew how the school would deal with a racist incident and that this would be done fairly.

December 2022

Being a Church of England school, one area of interest that came from parent feedback was around how the school might truly celebrate a range of lifestyles and practices, when this did not always chime with the Christian faith, particularly for those with more orthodox views. No parent who spoke to us disagreed that children should be exposed to differing views and learn about people from different backgrounds, but some voiced concern at how this might be done and how the children would develop their own sense of understanding. When we listened further, it seemed that the term “celebrate” was causing concern; parents were not keen for their children to be expected to celebrate the views of those different to theirs, for example during religious festivals.

We spent a long time considering this and spoke with our local vicar and other members of the staff team. Our vicar was very clear that, regardless of background or belief, promoting togetherness, love and understanding was a key teaching of the Christian faith. We agreed that this was largely a matter of shared vocabulary and probably needed crystal-clarity in what we were trying to achieve, so that we could minimise misconception and focus on the fact that this work was focused on values. We were working to show that everyone was valued and loved in this area; in particular:

- **We want to help all pupils to understand that our community includes those with a range of different backgrounds, views and beliefs, and that this is exciting, as it means we can learn from each other.**

- **We want those coming from minority backgrounds or groups to feel proud of this and be able to identify how they fit within the community.**
- **This range of backgrounds, views and beliefs is to be celebrated to help to further engender mutual respect, awareness and discussion.**
- **We want children to express their views and opinions in a safe environment without judgement, even if they differ from opinions/views from home.**

We needed to consider how the school could steer away from teaching that particular views are right or wrong, or becoming politicised in any way, and instead focus on developing and strengthening values. This was a conundrum that would require further thought, discussion and research.

In December our SLT were able to attend a talk by Andrew Moffat, who has created the No Outsiders resource. This offers two specific strands for children to explore and discuss issues around inclusivity. Firstly, the resource comes with a core reading spine. Each book on the spine has been selected to promote conversation around a range of issues, and the texts are age-appropriate from Early Years all the way through to the end of primary. The books come with a list of key teaching points and questions, which we felt would be helpful to our teachers and would help them to feel confident in talking to their classes. The second resource is a free, weekly assembly focus, which again gives a focus for discussion. As a Church of England school, we felt that many of these themes linked well to our core values.

One thing that really resonated with us was that, with many of the conversations we had around diversity, as adults we could remain impartial, listening to the views of the children and supporting them to discuss and come to their own conclusions. Andrew Moffat made the point that we would not reach consensus on some views – some religious beliefs, for example, directly challenge some “social norms”. He suggested that, in these situations, we had to remember that people with opposing views could agree to disagree and move on; this disagreement did not have to mean that there was argument or unrest.

Further to this, we had another interesting conversation, during a visit to one of our hub schools, when discussing some of the news stories relating to the Qatar World Cup. One colleague noted that their school was focusing only on the sport and not the political aspects. The question was posed, “What would be acceptable in terms of the way countries operate? If Qatar shouldn’t have the World Cup due to how they treat some people, should the USA be blocked due to their laws on gun use or the UK for the way that they turn away some groups of refugees?” This was a very interesting point of thought and helped us to frame our message about this project not being about politicisation but about knowing more and accepting more.

January and February 2023

The power of identity

The Christmas break gave us time to reflect on the learning and discussions from the course so far. Having thought about the challenge from parents in December, it had become clear that, through this project, we were trying to really promote the idea of identity – for all of our children to be able to recognise themselves and their backgrounds within school and to be able to feel proud of this. Having looked again at the reading spine we had developed, what struck us was that the vast majority of books were designed to promote discussion about diverse communities and living well together.

During a session with Jess Boyd, during our fourth seminar, we considered a well-used diagram showing the difference between equality, equity and liberation (courtesy of the Interaction Institute for Social Change). The image makes the point that sometimes; ensuring that everyone receives an equal amount will not meet the needs of all. Rather, we must consider whether some need more to reach the same end point as others, considered to be equity.

This made us think that perhaps, in the past, we had been too focused on equity. Were we preoccupied on small solutions – helping pupils to feel equal and part of a whole; rather than seeing the larger picture – helping children to feel proud of who they are and being able to share what makes them different. We don't always need to ensure equality, but to recognise and accept that inequality does exist and that these differences make us who we are.

In her book *Wish We Knew What to Say*, Dr Pragya Agarwal shares, "In telling our children that 'race does not matter' and in raising children to be colour-blind, we are actually creating more harm than good. We are not educating our children in the way racial inequalities work, and we are telling them that what a person of colour may go through is not valid. And we are dismissing their experience". Jess Boyd also talked about this, highlighting a number of statements that were widely used in classrooms with the aim to promote equality; "we don't see race in this classroom" and "we are all the same", to name two. We considered whether these statements miss the point. Do we want our children to see themselves as all the same? Or do we want them to be able to share their unique experiences and be able to talk about what has defined them as people?

This idea of really promoting the sense of identity struck us as a focus of our work. This was supported in the work of Marian Wright-Edelman, who stated, "Children of color and children born with a rich diversity of special characteristics and needs must be able to see themselves in the books they read and be exposed to a wide range of books reflective of the nation and world we all share" (Wright-Edelman, M, "Books all children should read" (2019). From all the learning and discussion that had previously

taken place, this reflection gave us a starting point for what we might do with our taught curriculum. How do our pupils see themselves and their cultures, backgrounds and experiences within what they learn in school?

March 2023

Taking the ideas gathered from the Great Representation seminars, we decided that the next focus for our school should be around the curriculum. We wanted to design opportunities for children to be able to see themselves, their families and their communities within school.

We recognise that the school curriculum, much of which was originally designed in the 1980s and 1990s, does tend to focus on White men who have shaped our world. If someone searched for photos of soldiers from WWII, they would likely see predominantly White people rather than pictures depicting the diversity that existed amongst those who fought. We talk about Britain being proud of those from across the Commonwealth coming to join the war effort, but this is not reflected in what our children see. Similarly, when teaching about the Space Race in the 1960s, little time is spent recognising the work of people like the “human computers” Katherine Johnson and Mary Jackson.

How could we begin to ensure that our curriculum allowed pupils to learn this breadth? What changes needed to be made so that each child could see themselves?

Following a number of conversations within school amongst staff, our SLT and with our school improvement partner, we decided to begin by ensuring that the opportunities pupils had to explore these themes were consistent across the school. This would come through discussion with staff in upcoming INSET time and would include:

- **A focus on how staff felt supported and were skilled in leading and steering discussions with pupils, including through our book spine and assembly focus sessions.**
- **A focus on book diversity. As a school, we occasionally use whole-school English topic planning from HFL Education, which provides learning around key texts, some of which were focused on inclusivity. We decided to have a strategic focus on this: Which texts were used? Which protected characteristics did they focus on? When did we use them to the greatest effect in supporting our pupils to see people they could relate to or learn from? As an example, this year we have used the texts *And Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson, and *Africa, Amazing Africa* by Atinuke.**

- A focus on ensuring that our history curriculum accurately represented society. The book *Black and British* by David Olusoga was very helpful in beginning this work as, in each era of British history, people of colour who had made notable contributions were recognised. It gave us a starting point to consider how our curriculum reflected this. Again, had it been originally built with a bias towards White, British people? Was there any element of colonialism that needed discussion?
- Spending time within our STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects learning about notable people who had made a difference in each area. As a staff team, we agreed to audit this to ensure that there were people from a range of backgrounds represented. Had there been an element of unconscious bias in the construction of this? Were all the people White, middle-aged males?

We also talked about smaller, individual actions that could be taken to help pupils to feel valued and proud of their identities. We agreed that, at the start of each school year, we would hold a day for pupils to talk about their backgrounds; wear clothes that they felt represented them; and share things that made them special, including foods and celebrations. Not only would this help them to feel that they were unique and important, but it would also act as a way to build relationships, trust and understanding with new classroom staff – an important act.

Conclusion

The work conducted through this project provided us with a real sense of the challenges that many face, silently and each day. We had not truly appreciated the extent of this or its impact until we heard the views and experiences of the speakers and colleagues on the programme.

We also recognised that, as a school, we had some tangible starting points – things we could do to begin supporting our entire school community to feel important, enabled and – most importantly – seen.

We hope that many of these actions will really support our pupils to develop that sense of identity and belonging but also help us to really understand how, through an appreciation of the diversity of our community, we can recognise its strength. A passage from Dr Pragya Agarwal's book *Wish We Knew What to Say*, really helped us with this. The passage explains how, if we want children to be able to thrive, we need to help them make sense of the confusing and emotionally charged messages they receive about themselves and others in society. Dr Agarwal goes on to say that if we can give

our children pride in their heritage and culture, and an unshakeable sense of self-worth, they will learn to support each other and to challenge injustice and inequality.

This work is by no means finished within our school, and it will take us a number of years to properly develop and embed it. However, through the programme, we have been able to take some big steps. We will need to see that this continues for the benefit of everyone within our school community.

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