

Transcript

00:00:01 Claire

Welcome to the Repair-Ed podcast where we reflect on education and reimagine equitable futures. I'm Claire Neaves, a researcher who worked in education in the city of Bristol in the Southwest of England for over 15 years. In each episode, I'll talk to educators and thinkers about current injustices in our schooling system and their ideas for creating fairer educational futures. This podcast forms part of Repair-Ed: a 5 year project, funded by UKRI to examine educational inequality in Bristol's primary schools.

00:00:35 Claire

Welcome to another episode of the Repair-Ed podcast. Today I'm in Bristol with Liz Kombaté. Liz works in the mental health space in the charity sector and holds lived, academic and professional experiences of inequality in the education system.

00:00:54 Claire

Morning, Liz.

00:00:56 Liz

Morning, Claire.

00:00:57 Claire

Can you start off by telling us a bit more about yourself and your educational journey?

00:01:01 Liz

Yeah, absolutely. I suppose I've worn many different hats throughout my life. So I grew up just outside of Bath and went to a quite small private primary school in a little town I then moved sort of into another village outside of Bath. Still very rural, very countryside area and then went to the local secondary school.

00:01:23 Liz

I was there for the duration of my education and completed my A-levels there and then went down quite sort of the traditional academic route I suppose. I went off to university and moved to Southampton where I studied law, so again quite sort of typically academic and I really enjoyed that there. I was really interested in looking at inequalities and how that really intersects with the law.

00:01:43 Liz

I then went to UCL in London. So again very much in that kind of institutional space, very redbrick and studied race, ethnicity and post colonial studies. So it's a really great opportunity to add to my personal experiences and examine that a little bit more deeply.

00:02:02 Liz

And since then I've been working in the charity sector. So I was working in a disability justice charity as a fundraiser, and that takes me to today, where I'm working for Bath Mind, which is a local mental health and well-being charity across Bath and North-East Somerset. So that's kind of my my route to where I am today. I also do a little bit of volunteering.

00:02:23 Liz

I've done some mentoring and a bit of tutoring alongside kind of paid roles within Southampton and I also work as, well, volunteer as a trustee at Southampton National Park City and that's a really great way for us to think about how we can bring in sustainability with kind of mental health and how that intersects with education and and all of those factors as well.

00:02:44 Claire

Brilliant. Oh, that's really interesting.

00:02:46 Claire

And lots of parallels because I did a law degree originally, and I did my PGCE - my teaching qualification at Southampton Uni.

00:02:57 Claire

So yeah, it's interesting to hear someone else who's been there and yeah, lots of crossovers and, and I know we're gonna get on to talking about some of your your work a bit later on but if we go sort of right back to the start so our project Repair-Ed is looking at structural injustice in primary school education through the lenses of race and class.

00:03:18 Claire

So when you were in primary school, did you have any sense of how your identity shaped your experience of education?

00:03:26 Liz

I think yeah, it's really interesting thinking about being at a young age of kind of four or five and starting school and where you start to have that sense of self-awareness and probably the first time where I remember interacting with, you know, people that were outside of my family probably.

00:03:39 Liz

As I mentioned in the introduction, I went to quite a small school, there were probably under 100 pupils in the whole school and it was a private school. So, you know, there's quite a particular demographic of people from sort of quite affluent backgrounds I suppose.

00:03:56 Liz

And that was really interesting. I think in, in terms of the activities that you had access to. But in terms of my own personal sense of difference. It's still quite a white middle class area. And I definitely noticed kind of on a sort of race, race and ethnicity lends that sense of difference, and reflecting back, I know that I gravitated towards other people of colour within the school and they're still some of my great friends today and I think there's something quite interesting there. How even at a young age there's almost that sort of unwritten rule, I suppose that you you kind of gravitate towards people to sort of get away from that sense of difference.

00:04:36 Claire

Yeah. And that's really interesting because in our in our primary schools that we're visiting, we often have the schools tell us that they're they're really diverse and inclusive, and you know, it's not to say that that's not true. But what we've noticed is a real kind of separation along racial lines between the children in the school. So they're not as integrated as I think the schools would like to think.

00:05:00 Claire

So yeah, can you tell us a little bit more about that? How did your, how did your primary education sort of play out in terms of your race? Did you, did you feel that there was a difference there from from teachers or or how you were taught or?

00:05:17 Liz

I think to come from kind of my personal background of my parents and my parents actually interestingly are both teachers, so I kind of had that that as well, in they're very education focused, you know, being so important and possibly that's part of why I followed that quite traditional academics route maybe? I think that instilled within me and when I

talk to lots of other pupils who I was friends with at the time, there's that kind of mindset of the odds are stacked against you because of the colour of your skin. Because of your ethnicity, because of your religion. So you need to work twice, three times, five times as hard as your white peers and even while still kind of acknowledging that privilege of being in a privileged space where you're in a smaller class size that was still something that was really instilled in me and I imagine was part of the reason why I went to that school.

00:06:07 Liz

So I think that that's that's quite interesting to think of. I think in terms of teaching, it's hard to say from a young age. I think you you're not necessarily aware of whether it's implicit or explicit racism, but I do think there was probably a lack of understanding of cultural differences or perhaps not knowing the right thing to say.

00:06:28 Liz

I remember there was an incident when I was about sort of, in year 4 I think. And there was a boy who told me that I needed to wash my hands because my hands are brown. You know, obviously a very explicit moment of racism and the teachers sort of kind of down, downplayed down, that and sort of, "Ohh, you know, he was just being silly. He was just, you know, not being very nice. He's just a young boy." And I remember taking it back to my parents and of course being really distraught and upset about that...

00:06:58 Claire

Yeah, of course.

00:07:00

And I think for me that really highlighted that lack of understanding of the impact.

00:07:05 Claire

Yes. Yeah.

00:07:06 Liz

Yeah, that going kind of going forward and how that actually these well meaning teachers who were really fantastic and, you know, did so much in terms of education, still didn't necessarily have that understanding of the impact. So I think that's an example for me that really, really kind of crystallises it.

00:07:25 Claire

Yeah, a real lack of racial literacy there on the part of the teachers and I guess so. You know, we're we're not talking that long ago, are we? You know, what? I don't know what year did you go to school?

00:07:39 Liz

So I'm 25 at the moment so.

00:07:42 Claire

Really recent.

00:07:43 Liz

Yeah, it's in, you know, the last couple of decades, it's this century, you know, I was born in 2000, so in terms of timing, it's not that long ago. Yeah, not long at all.

00:07:52 Claire

And I suppose a story that would perhaps feel quite shocking to you know very well meaning white teachers listening to this thinking, 'oh gosh, that's awful.' But probably sadly not unusual at all for people of colour listening to this, I think they'll really sort of hear that, and it will resonate, especially that that kind of lack of validation from the teachers.

00:08:09 Claire

And how did that sort of happen

00:08:12 Claire

Happen as as you went through into secondary and you did your A levels and still sort of in the Bath area you said which for people who aren't familiar with Bath, it's very white, middle class affluent city in many ways so, how how was your secondary education?

00:08:39 Liz

I think going to secondary school was a really good opportunity for me in terms of understanding my own identity and also kind of just being in a in a bigger and more diverse pool of individuals. I do caveat that with it's still, you know, in quite a white area and still quite an affluent area, although this is then a state school.

00:08:54 Liz

I think for me it was a really great opportunity to start to blend in a little bit more. I think during primary school because it was quite small and because I was one of probably about three or four people of colour, there was that real visibility and being in a secondary school

of, you know, maybe at 1000 to 2000 people, there's a little bit more anonymity. But I I do think in terms of again being framing it within that kind of white context...

00:09:21 Liz

There were lots of instances of tokenism. Luckily I can say there weren't really too many instances of sort of explicit racism, but I think it's for me that kind of, that culture of tokenism that is embedded.

00:09:38 Liz

So for example, being on like a school prospectus or when there's open days.

00:09:40 Liz

And always being called upon.

00:09:49 Liz

I think you know that's that's something that when I talk to my sister who also went to the same school but five years after me.. And has not long finished. That's something that was quite, quite familiar. It's always, "Ohh, Liz, can you do this? Liz, can you do that?" And I I I remember being in conversations with governors and I can't help but reflect on that. And I think I wonder if.

00:10:04 Liz

It was a, you know, a genuine 'we think you'll be a good ambassador for the school' or if there was that kind of undertone of let's pull out one of the few people of colour in the school, almost.

00:10:20 Claire

Yeah

00:10:21 Liz

Yeah.

00:10:16 Claire

And perhaps perhaps both. I guess you know they they probably thought you were a very good ambassador for the school and you had loads to say. But yeah, absolutely. That that must have been part of the reason, which really...

00:10:31 Claire

You know, we can't find a sort of better description of tokenism, I guess and and what sort of impact did that have on you as a, as a child?

00:10:47 Liz

I suppose to an extent there's kind of a a pressure and again caveating that with, you know, a sense of immense privilege, being able to have completed education and gone into higher education. But I I think probably the pressure of...

00:10:58 Liz

Kind of familial - not to say that my my parents are kind of pressurising me explicitly, but that idea of 'you you need to work harder, you need to be the best you can be', I think...

00:11:13 Liz

On a familial but also a cultural level of 'it, it will be harder for you, so you need to do that', I think as well in kind of a school context being very aware of very prevalent stereotypes that that are about people of colour, about Black people, about certain groups that actually maybe an internalised sense of 'well I need to prove it wrong.' And I need to.

00:11:34 Liz

Be the most studious and I need to, I don't know, get straight A's or whatever, I don't think I ever had that thought explicitly. But that kind of embedded belief of, 'oh I need to always be, always be on my A game'.

00:11:48 Liz

And that probably did feed into. Why then being, you know, seen as an ambassador for the school? Because I, you know, I was on the school council and I got stuck into everything and was determined to do as much as possible.

00:12:00 Liz

But equally I I see still see that kind of, yeah, internalised pressure, I think I said of

00:12:05 Liz

Of trying to.

00:12:07 Liz

Maybe prove something perhaps?

00:12:10 Claire

Yeah. And I think it's interesting what you describe. I've heard from a lot of people of colour who, in some ways, they view their their experiences while they're in education, as really positive. You know, 'I got to do this' and 'I got to do that', and it's only later when they've reflected with hindsight, like 'ohh, that was really tokenistic'. And things like culture days at school where it was like, 'oh, I got to dress up in my traditional cultural dress and I think actually you know that was, that was reflected on this day, but it wasn't anywhere in the curriculum.'

00:12:44 Claire

And so it wasn't that kind of holistic view of, you know, the culture of the pupils at the school and I mean do you, do you remember anything about the the curriculum at school? Did you get a chance to learn about people outside of that very kind of narrow white lens?

00:13:03 Liz

I think that that's something that was really only restricted to learning about sort of Black trauma. Really. And I think that that's unfortunately quite a common experience is the the only time that individuals are talked about, perhaps Black history, Black culture is when we're thinking about the slave trade. And of course that's really important and yes, so, so important for us to be aware of and to learn about that but it does feel like it's so centred on Black trauma.

00:13:31 Liz

And that's the time and we were shown roots and we did a little bit of drumming for maybe one term.

00:13:36 Liz

And then that's kind of a drop in the ocean that it's not an, it's not embedded throughout the curriculum. Again thinking about sort of the books that we studied at, you know sort of GCSE English are all very sort of the typical classic white authors, which again, you know Shakespeare's fantastic. My mum's an English teacher and, you know, I think I think that those are some really key texts but there wasn't a lot of diversity there.

00:13:59 Liz

And I mean diversity in the broader sense, not just thinking about race, but also thinking about class, sexuality, gender. It was essentially a lot of quite privileged white men that we were studying the books of.

00:14:11 Claire

Yeah, absolutely.

00:14:12 Liz

And it would have been great to have had the opportunity to to get into that and I think not only from a personal perspective and be able to kind of delve into perhaps my own culture, but for everyone to have that exposure to different cultures as well, particularly in quite, a white school in a white area.

00:14:26

Hmm.Yeah, it benefits everyone, doesn't it, that that it's a broader curriculum and more diversity and you know, moving through that to decolonising the curriculum, you know, there's so much power and you know, real kind of knowledge, I guess that's not shared, that's just skimmed over.

00:14:49 Claire

And you know, we speak to school leaders who are trying to do these things and feel really constrained by, you know, the GCSE exams and you know, the the national curriculum, even though academies don't have to follow the national curriculum, the sort of the accountability agenda and it it can be - result in things becoming quite narrowed.

00:15:12 Claire

And it's - yeah. It's good to hear from you about how that feels as a pupil in that system, because I think that's something that perhaps we don't focus on enough when we're having these discussions. It can be very sort of theoretical and I think it's really important to hear.

00:15:28 Claire

So I suppose I wanted to move on to thinking a bit about higher education because that's where I think you've got some particular kind of experiences that you wanted to share.

00:15:41 Claire

So when we first spoke, you mentioned your experiences of systemic injustices in higher education in particular, and you were thinking about how a range of identities intersect within that environment. So I'd love to hear more about that.

00:15:52 Liz

Yeah, absolutely. I think so. Yeah. Kind of going back to that point in my timeline of my experiences. So yeah, it's 2018, I had moved to Southampton Uni and was studying law and so you know quite a traditionally I suppose white middle class discipline. If I wanna

frame it like that and for some reason I had, I had it in my head that that's what I wanted to study and I wanted to be a lawyer. And that was a path I wanted to go down and and my experiences during that time, although I really enjoyed that time, really shaped where I am today with kind of working in the charity sector and kind of working in the space of injustice a little bit more.

00:16:31

So I think, for me, you're very much encouraged. If I don't know if any listeners are sort of familiar with how you qualify as a solicitor, but essentially you have 7 modules that you have to complete and then you do have a range of option modules. During my experiences, I only had one professor that was Black during the whole time in a, you know, in a department of I don't know, 100 staff, let's say and and that was I think the first really kind of interesting observation especially being you know 18 at this point. I'm not a child anymore. I'm quite aware of actually my place in the world, how I interact with other people.

00:17:12 Liz

So that was kind of quite a stark interesting point and that individual was someone who was teaching a module that was a little bit more to do with injustice and human rights. So it then got me kind of thinking about whether it's only people that have that experience that almost quote unquote, 'care' about these issues. Is it only if you're someone that's ever...if you're someone from a marginalised group that you care?

00:17:35 Liz

And that was kind of a question mark that that happened for me.

00:17:37 Liz

And I think the other example coming back to that point of tokenism was you're, you know, as a as a law student, you're encouraged to go to the firms and go to open days and you'll build up your CV. And and those sorts of things to make you employable. So I booked myself on to them with different different peers and there were so many different sort of open days for Black students or open days for sort of a range of different marginalised groups. There's a disabled students day, et cetera.

00:18:05 Liz

And I think that those felt incredibly tokenistic. I think that kind of on the surface, brilliant. You've noticed that there's not enough Black trainee solicitors coming through, there's not enough disabled or not enough queer solicitors coming through, let's say.

00:18:21

But for me, whenever I asked a question, 'what, you know what are you doing to retain those people? What are you doing beyond these days?' Complete blank faces. And there's sort of a a sense of maybe mild panic of, "well, we, we have these days to encourage people." And I think that highlighted to me again that that tokenism, that lack of future thought for, 'ok we're getting people through the door. Fantastic.'

00:18:48 Liz

But that feels like such a tick box. How are you retaining people? And it really truthfully - this is not to dismiss the profession at all because I think it's fantastic - but on a personal level, really kind of turned me off of that career path and set me, set me on a different path. Really.

00:19:06 Liz

I think that was, yeah, that was quite foundational. I think in a career that I was thinking, you know, for 10 years, 'this is what I'm going to do.' But actually those range of experiences culminated in me thinking, 'oh this still feels really tokenistic, and I don't know if this is a place where I can envision myself belonging for a range of different reasons'.

00:19:24 Liz

And I think that, reflecting on that does speak volumes, I mean, you know, the education I've had, the voice I have, the area that I've grown up in kind of quote unquote 'on paper', maybe fits that demographic quite well and coming from that place of privilege. But it's still kind of for me thinking about intersectionality and actually, although I've got many of those characteristics that you think, 'yeah, this is the place for you' knowing that perhaps there isn't that sense of authentic belonging for Black and people of colour, and that space for me was kind of an interesting thing to weigh up.

00:20:02 Claire

Yeah, and I think we see that mirrored in the teaching profession where quite often something that comes up is your teaching staff doesn't reflect the diversity of your pupils and schools think, 'Right? How do we recruit more Black people? How do we recruit more people of colour?'

00:20:20 Claire

But actually, you're absolutely right that the question that needs to be asked is, 'How are you retaining these staff? What are you doing to care for these staff when they're in your organisation?' Because we talked about in a couple of podcast episodes ago with Keziah

Featherstone about the over-representation of Black trainees in regards to the population, which then dips off and off and off as you get through to senior leadership. So it's, you know, the issue isn't about recruitment. And so putting on these extra days, you know, is as you say, really tokenistic. But what is it that's that's needed when people are actually in these professions to care? And I think it's probably because that recruitment effort reflects the reality of working within that system - that any representation is going to be tokenistic. There isn't that sense of real care.

00:21:09 Claire

And you know that people...you described it as panic, which I think is absolutely accurate. You know, when we talked to head teachers and school leaders. You know, 'what are you doing?' It's sort of 'oh! This is an accountability thing. How can I do that?' And you know, but it's it's not accountability. It's about care and looking after staff.

00:21:30 Claire

And you know in the last episode, Curtis from Class 13 spoke about moving away from deficit ideologies. And the flip side of that, which is, you know, this kind of positive representation but it's still going to be tokenistic if you're using difference as a way to to support people.

00:21:54 Claire

So yeah, really, really useful to hear. And so how did how did things kind of move on for you then?

00:22:02 Liz

So I think for me this was sort of around the second year. So we're in 2020 and of course unfortunately we all know what happened in 2020.

00:22:09 Liz

Yeah, so I was sort of moving away from the idea of qualifying as a solicitor and thinking 'ohh goodness, what do I need to do? I need to write my dissertation next year. We've gone into lockdown' – all of these sorts of things.

00:22:22 Liz

And, you know, after a bit of reflection and a bit of researching, I was thinking I want to write my dissertation about the representation of people of colour within key institutions in the UK, so I - all all online pretty much because of the pandemic - was researching and really kind of looking into what is what's the data saying, you know, what are the statistics?

00:22:44 Liz

What are the hard facts on the representation of people of colour in the judiciary? What's the representation in criminal justice kind of space, in policing and all of these institutions, and how does that link to this bigger picture?

00:23:00 Liz

So I was writing this dissertation and about a month before I was due to hand it in, I was kind of doing the finishing touches and the report that was commissioned by Boris Johnson, led by Tony Sewell, came out and I was thinking, you know, I was sort of writing my conclusions and that came out and of course I was going through that with a highlighter and sort of thinking, see, ok this is important.

00:23:21 Liz

You know, deleted chunks of my existing dissertation and thinking, 'right I need to talk about this a little bit more.'

00:23:26 Claire

Yeah. For those listeners who aren't familiar with that report, can you just explain what it is?

00:23:32 Liz

Yes, absolutely. So I suppose to paraphrase and to give a high level overview of what it talks about, it was essentially to dispel, I suppose, this kind of prevalent, I say 'idea' with kind of inverted commas that Britain is an institutionally racist country. And that's the terminology used. This was just reiterating the context of the time, you know, during the pandemic we had that resurgence, of kind of Black Lives matter, in the Bristol context, you know the toppling of Edward Colston's statue.

00:24:09 Liz

Yeah, all of these really large scale local, national, global events happening and I think really kind of culminating in this sense of actually there's a lot of injustice in the world. We saw it during the pandemic with outcomes for Black and brown people across you know the UK, across the United States.

00:24:29 Liz

So I think this was kind of this real climate of analysing injustice of people from grassroots up into, you know, key institutions in the country thinking this, this is not OK. There is inequality and a lot of that within this country's racial inequality.

00:24:46 Liz

I think that the report was a really interesting read, shall I say? I think if yeah, if anyone is interested to kind of flick to have a flick through, I think that it felt quite dismissive of the impact of institutional racism. I mean it it said that it's it's not one of the key determining factors in people's outcomes.

00:25:10 Liz

And and I I feel like it really dismisses the intergenerational trauma that a lot of Black and brown people have within this country. It really is dismissive of the systemic issues and I think that that's why I needed to include it in my dissertation and to really bring that in and think, actually, you know, a few years ago in 2017, we had a David Lammy report.

00:25:30 Liz

And that was, you know, essentially saying there is a lot of institutional racism in this country. And I sort of was almost joking, in probably bad taste with my family, like "Ohh fantastic. We've solved institutional racism in a few years. Brilliant."

00:25:46 Liz

And you know, tongue in cheek, but I think that the report was very dismissive.

00:25:53 Claire

Absolutely. And I guess important to point out that Tony Sewell is a Black man. So you know the... beyond tokenism that almost like weaponizing of Black identity to placate people and to say you know 'well, we can trust this Black guy with what he says about race and this report concludes that, you know, there isn't institutional racism' and that, you know it...

00:26:20 Claire

Almost pitting David Lammy and Tony Sewell against each other, you know, 'let's, let's let these Black people, you know, have this discussion. This is a Black discussion.' Actually, you know, I'd argue that the people who need to be talking about institutional racism are white people. It's, you know, it's it's white people who are often at the head of these institutions which are racist.

00:26:40 Liz

Just to jump in there, I think, yeah, that's absolutely a really important point, especially for people listening who maybe aren't familiar with the report that, yeah, Tony Sewell's, is a Black man who has, you know, had quite a prestigious career, has climbed the ranks and I

think that that does highlight the issue of almost taking just one story and not speaking to a range of lived experiences.

00:27:04 Liz

And and again coming back to my own self, you know, a sense of immense privilege, really throughout my life and have had on the whole quite positive academic experiences and have gone through higher education et cetera.

00:27:16 Liz

Does that mean that if you are someone living, perhaps in a more socioeconomically deprived inner-city area of London that just because me living in my countryside, you know, going to a little village school has had a positive experience that that's not the case for you. I think that's, that it really does highlight, with the report, for me, the danger of only looking at one story and not thinking about a range of different experiences and as well with intersectionality and thinking about how a range of our different characteristics come into play.

00:27:47 Claire

Absolutely. Yeah. And I think one of the things that you said earlier was your experience of having that Black lecturer delivering a really interesting course to do more with human rights and injustice, and that question around, you know, is it only marginalised people who who care about these issues? So yeah, let's talk a bit more about that because I think when you see the people who are doing the work in these spaces, they're often Black and brown.

00:28:15 Claire

If they're white, they're often queer or, you know, they're often in interracial relationships or, you know, they have some connection to, you know, marginalised identity in some way. And there's that tension, isn't there, between kind of, we shouldn't...

00:28:36 Claire

It shouldn't be that marginalised groups have to do all the work, but also we want people to listen to our stories, so it's it's a bit of a tension and I guess you know, how has that played out for you?

00:28:50 Liz

Yeah, you're right. It is such a tension and I think that you do often need to have that initial interest because it's not on a lot of people's radars. And as you mentioned, you know often

it is people from a marginalised group or multiple marginalised groups or have a connection to in some capacity. So I think in my current role, so I'm working for Bath Mind as a diversity and inclusion lead. So I have lots of these conversations with my colleagues and with people who are using our services and other stakeholders in the area and I think what's been really key for us is understanding how it how it links to mental health and how all of these factors intersect with mental health outcomes.

00:29:28 Liz

So for us, generally lived experience is really, really key - thinking about the members of staff and a lot of our staff do bring their own lived experience of their mental health and that's actively encouraged and that informs all of the work we do - whether that's kind of on a more grassroots level, whether that's in sessions with service users or whether that's kind of on our strategy in kind of policy levels, operation in the organisation.

00:30:01 Liz

So I think organisations that can try and embed and understand that it's not a flaw, it's not something that's reductive but actually not only enable staff to bring them, their whole self to work and be able to speak quite candidly and have better relationships, but also translates to having a better organisation where you know retention rates are higher and actually the outputs in the individuals we can reach across BANES is a lot more authentic.

00:30:31 Claire

Yeah. So that's Bath and North-East Somerset, BANES. Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's so important, just having staff that really understand the experiences of the service users.

00:30:46 Claire

And and I guess perhaps that's something that was really absent for you when you were looking for, you know, training contracts or, you know looking at solicitors' firms that when you asked those questions people couldn't answer because they didn't share that experience.

00:31:03 Liz

Absolutely. And I think it again just comes back to the point of it's not even something that they had thought of or prepared for because it wasn't in their it wasn't on their radar to think about, whereas for many people from, you know, different marginalised backgrounds, that's something they're probably thinking about on a daily basis in some capacity.

00:31:22 Claire

Yeah. So how do you use your own experiences in your in your work, in the mental health sector?

00:31:29 Liz

I think for me it's about being able to bring my whole self to work and being able to be really open. Initially quite challenging actually and and that's kind of probably from my own perspective of not always having felt that I could be open and honest about experiences about you know microaggressions that are happening.

00:31:48 Liz

But I think working in a in working in the charity sector also in the mental health and the kind of care sector has enabled me to bring that a lot more.

00:31:57 Liz

And so one of the examples that we have at work is I have this - the favourite part of my job is that I chair the equality, diversity and inclusion network at Bath Mind and we meet monthly and it's a fantastic way for members of staff who are from a marginalised community, but also we have lots of allies as well who are there to learn and bring their experience of allyship and kind of be able to interrelate with other individuals where we can all talk about, on a personal level, but also a professional level how our identities shape the work we do.

00:32:33 Liz

Perhaps that's working with a client who comes from a similar background to you, or often interestingly if they come from quite a different background, and sometimes we can workshop things and think actually, you know, maybe I'm struggling to relate to someone - they come from a different religious background or I'm not sure I understand their sexuality. I really want to be able to learn more and actually so I can best support this person because we're not just an individual. We don't just have anxiety or depression or OCD. There's so many reasons and and factors that feed into that so I think that's a really fantastic opportunity for us to show how our lived experiences actually enhance the work we do and constructively be able to support people better.

00:33:17 Claire

And and that's really nice for sort of people who are listening, who are working in schools because often in schools that kind of EDI work is often seen as an add-on or you know something that's getting in the way of that core function of learning. But actually thinking about how you know that's going to get the best out of everyone, people being able to be

their, their full authentic selves. And I guess a really nice practical example of you know what schools can do

00:33:49 Claire

You know the idea of having some kind of forum, you know, whether that's for staff within, within a school or an academy trust or whether that's something to do when trying to connect with parents, that kind of coming together and sharing of different experiences, different religions, different sexualities, different cultural backgrounds, you know which would really support with that kind of issue that I mentioned earlier of having that diversity, but not necessarily that belonging and that real community. So that's a really nice practical example.

00:34:20 Claire

So I think we'll move on to our final question, which is the same for all guests on our podcast. So thinking about your own experiences of education, what would a just education system look like to you?

00:34:38 Liz

It's a fantastic question and I think for me at the core is to understand the difference between equity and equality. I think that's a really big one and something that I find myself talking about a lot in my work, so.

00:34:53 Liz

As much as it would be absolutely fantastic if we were in a world where everyone had the exact same opportunities and we were all at the same starting point in life, I think being, you know the kind of realist in me knows that that's not the case. Thinking about my own experiences, thinking about the service users that we support at work and thinking about people that you just know in life, we haven't all had the same opportunities.

00:35:14 Liz

I think if there was more of an almost open acknowledgement of that, and understanding that actually people have access to different resources, but how can we try and...to kind of you know that phrase like level the playing field, I think that would be really important. I think another element of that and for me is kind of that extracurricular support. So thinking about from the mental health context, we know that access to time outside being in nature and taking part in sports is so beneficial for our mental health. You know learning instruments, being involved in arts, but often there's a price tag for that and we know that, you know, arts funding has been cut across many state schools.

00:35:54 Liz

So it's then sort of come to a point where, you know, a lot of private schools still have, you know, art GCSEs or A levels, drama, et cetera. It feels like there's quite a divide there between who can actually access these activities that are not only so culturally important as a society, but also really enriching on an individual level as well. So I think for me, it's yeah, that equality and equity difference and also that, that opportunity to be able to access a range of different activities outside of the traditional kind of academic bounds.

00:36:27 Claire

Yeah, brilliant. And it's lovely to hear that from someone who I guess, like me, has had a, quite a traditional academic background, you know, and that there's so much more to education than that really narrow academic path isn't there? And it's it's wonderful when you were talking about arts and music, your face lit up. You know, it's it has such a profound impact on all of us, doesn't it? So that's a really lovely vision, I guess, for a just education system.

00:36:55 Claire

So it's been really wonderful talking to you today. Thank you so much Liz.

00:36:58 Liz

Thank you so much, Claire.

00:37:00 Claire

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