

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 South West 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.

00:00:33 Claire

Welcome to another episode of the Repair-Ed podcast and welcome to 2026.

00:00:39 Claire

My guest today is Shabna Begum, CEO of the Runnymede Trust.

00:00:43 Claire

Hi, Shabna.

00:00:44 Shabna

Hi.

00:00:44 Claire

I wondered if we could start with an introduction to the Runnymede Trust?

00:00:49 Shabna

So the Runnymede Trust is a racial justice charity think tank. We were kind of first born in 1968, so we are almost at our 60th birthday in a couple of years time, but I think we were one of the first kind of racial justice organisations that was really committed to looking at what did racism look like in the UK and very much about kind of influencing government policy and trying to make sure that policies weren't either harmful or were kind of progressing and advancing the interests of kind of racialised communities in the UK.

00:01:29 Shabna

So now there are a lot more racial justice organisations and we have lots of kind of other actors in the sector, some of which kind of focus on specific communities. But I guess the kind of the USP [unique selling point] of Runnymede Trust still remains the fact that we talk

across all experiences of racial inequality from all communities. And so we kind of very much speak to solidarity of experience across different communities, not to raise differences, not to kind of suggest that everyone experiences racism in the same way, but to kind of, yeah, to argue that actually structural racism kind of shows up in different ways, but actually collective action toward kind of overcoming that is really important.

00:02:15 Claire

Great, thanks.

00:02:16 Claire

And what about your journey to your role? So I think you were a teacher, weren't you?

00:02:21 Shabna

Yeah, so I was a teacher. I was a teacher for 23 years before I came to Runnymede Trust.

00:02:26 Shabna

So I've spent most of my professional and adult life being a teacher. And I taught actually not far from where we're at here in Hackney. So I used to teach at Stoke Newington School for 19 of those 23 years. So I was very much embedded in that community. It's a community that I grew up in as well. So I lived around there. My parents still live there as well.

00:02:49 Shabna

So I taught mainly politics in the sixth form, but also taught key stage three humanities in the lower school. And so that was, I thought I was always going to be a teacher and then I actually did a PhD toward the latter part of my career. I didn't realise it was going to be the latter part of my career because I was doing it not for kind of professional reasons, it was around my parents' migration history and I really wanted to kind of record some of their experiences and their community experiences.

00:03:18 Shabna

So I did the PhD in 2018, or I started it in 2018 and completed it in the three years. And that brought me into contact with Runnymede Trust, partly because of some of the work that they had done, which kind of influenced my own work. I'd always known about the Runnymede Trust, but it brought me into more direct contact.

00:03:39 Shabna

And I took on a part time research contract with them four years ago on a particular report, which was around women of colour in, in the workplace and in the labour market. And that was my entry into Runnymede Trust.

00:03:51 Shabna

And I had a decision to make after I finished the PhD, whether to go back to teaching or to choose something different. And maybe some of the reasons, there were lots of pull factors and push factors, and some of the push factors we'll probably kind of talk about perhaps during this conversation.

00:04:04 Claire

Yeah, I'm sure.

00:04:05 Shabna

But yeah, so that became my route into Runnymede Trust. And I started as a researcher and then have kind of travelled through to being chief exec, which is the most privileged position to be in because it's an organisation that I've always had a huge amount of respect and affection for and to now lead and be able to steer it and steward it through what are really kind of quite turbulent times. Feels like both a huge responsibility, but actually, yeah, a real honour to be able to do that as well.

00:04:35 Claire

Oh, great.

00:04:37 Claire

Yeah, so let's talk a bit about education. So our project, Repair-Ed, focuses on educational inequality. And I know the Runnymede Trust have done some really important work in this area. So yeah, could you tell us a bit about that and how you've worked with education?

00:04:53 Shabna

Yeah, so we've done lots of work around education and actually education was probably the kind of the backbone of Runnymede Trust when we first started. It's always been there. We've kind of gone into criminal justice, we've gone into immigration, we've gone into health and housing, but education was probably the starting point for the work that we were doing back in 1968. And we have done work on everything from school exclusions and the kind of systems and the discipline systems within schools to more recently we've done work around, and are continuing to work with our partners Penguin on a programme called Lit in Colour, which is looking at English Literature and the study of kind of writers of colour

in the English curriculum. We've done work on Our Migration Story, which is a history kind of programme looking at how history is taught and how empire and migration are taught in schools. And then more recently we've also done a report on GCSE art education, again, looking at the representation of kind of artists of colour in our curriculum.

00:06:01 Shabna

So we've done both kind of curriculum related, we've done kind of school systems related. We've also done more work around teacher training as well, and recognising that actually you can't deliver good inclusive anti-racist education through subject areas if teachers don't feel confident in talking about these issues. And that is definitely showing up across all of our different research projects, that one of the big barriers is teacher confidence and teachers feeling able to talk about these issues, because generally they haven't been taught it themselves, they've gone through the school system. And so therefore kind of that lack of literacy and confidence is also a barrier.

00:06:39 Shabna

So we've got kind of, done lots of research around those issues, and then we try and take those and kind of influence policy and kind of interactions with Parliament and other stakeholders as well.

00:06:51 Claire

Yeah, can you share a little bit about how you'd approach sort of one of these research projects? 'Cause I think sitting here as a teacher, I'm sort of thinking, oh yeah, like history, English lit, art, you know, I've been in secondary schools, I recognise how narrow those curricula are. And I've sort of, you know, I've seen how frustrating it is when, you know, even now with the new curriculum review, it's still sort of an entitlement rather than a, 'you must do this.' It's that kind of, 'it would be great if you could put in some diversity in the curriculum'. So how do you go from sort of tackling something that seems to be evident? You know, I think if you ask most teachers, they'd say the curriculum is too white. How do you go from knowing that to kind of, yeah, really influencing policy?

00:07:46 Shabna

It's really difficult, right? Because I think that the policy conversation that we have currently simply doesn't really want to engage on those terms. I think that we have a government in power and I think most of like, whether it's Labour or the Conservative Party, both of them in government and outside of government, are not talking about race and anti-racism in a way that is anywhere near where we need it to be.

00:08:12 Shabna

The kind of lack of intelligence, but also the lack of kind of commitment to these issues is a real problem. So actually, whilst...And this is the case for lots of our work, where what we think is kind of obvious and evident and all of the research kind of points to a certain conclusion that doesn't seem to then kind of commit politicians to any kind of policy kind of prescription or action.

00:08:40 Shabna

And I think that there are lots of reasons for that. I think that there are kind of money issues and funding issues that are barriers. But I think that there is a lack of political will as well.

00:08:54 Claire

For sure.

00:08:55 Shabna

I think that that is definitely one of the barriers. I think there's also probably a lack of political courage in that as well because I think that what might feel evident to you and I actually is not evident in the wider world currently. I think it's contested and deeply contested and ferociously contested and so therefore what we see as maybe a straightforward kind of outcome that actually the curriculum is clearly kind of Eurocentric and also kind of all sorts of things about the actual assessment process. These things we can tell that the research says that they're not good for children and young people and yet they don't change and it's kind of there is a battle here, right? There's a battle in terms of what our education system should be like and what's the purpose and that sits kind of probably at the heart of it.

00:09:44 Claire

And I guess it's tricky because you know, most people have been through the education system and the people who are sitting there at the DfE [Department for Education] or, you know, wherever else in government making policy, the education system worked absolutely fine for them. So they don't see the need to change it.

00:10:01 Shabna

Yeah, I think that's true.

00:10:03 Shabna

I think that there's safety in terms of kind of keeping things fairly the same, right? I think that to want to change and to change something drastically would require those people to

feel that it's broken, to feel that it's not working for them and the people that they care about. And currently that hasn't entered into their kind of consciousness, not in a strong enough way to enable them to kind of feel that there is an urgency to this. And so you're right, if you are complacent about the system because the system has served you, then you don't have the same level of incentive to do the work.

00:10:39 Claire

Yeah, and I think I'm just thinking about kind of some of the statistics that we're probably both really familiar with around things like you talked about exclusions, you know, over-representation of certain ethnic groups in exclusions, for example, it's not just that they're kind of ambivalent about those and saying it doesn't really matter. It's that they're actively denying that that's the case, aren't they?

00:11:01 Claire

You know, we have all these statistics around so many things in education and yet they're contested. How is that possible, I guess, is what I want to know. What are your thoughts on that? Like, you've got hard data that, you know, say Black boys are disproportionately excluded and suspended from school and the powers that be are saying, well, no, that's not actually true. Here's a different spin on the data.

00:11:26 Shabna

Yeah, well, I think there are two sides to that, right? So in terms of the, there's a contestation, which is about is it the school or is it the actual pathologies of those communities? And so there's a denial that it's the school system that's responsible for those outcomes. And that's one way that they're denied or kind of 'there's no reason for the school to act because this is a problem with the communities and the communities themselves need to fix that up'. And that's kind of the thing that came from the Sewell report in 2021, which tried to say that actually institutional racism doesn't really exist anymore.

00:12:01 Shabna

You know, if you have a good work ethic, then you can get by and look at the model minority communities that have done really well and fared really well through the education system, and so they will use that as the evidence to say that racism doesn't exist. But that again is a denial of the different experiences of different communities who have arrived, right? And so the kind of the comparison of African students versus Caribbean students and the different outcomes for these groups is located in, well, the cultural pathologies of one group and the cultural virtue of another group. Whereas

actually these two groups have had very different routes into the UK, have very different historical baggage that has enabled them to arrive with either certain assets or certain kind of cultural stereotypes attached to them that has shaped their educational experience.

00:12:54 Shabna

So again, that is a structural, historically, geographically designed experience. And so Caribbean students in the US, for example, they are the model minority there. They are, they exceed and kind of, you know, do better. So it's not about the specific racial, cultural community, it is about the experience around them. And so I think that's one way of denying that.

00:13:19 Shabna

I think the other way of denying it is that it's also batted into, and what about the white working-class kind of communities that are left behind, as though that that is a competitive kind of issue. And actually, I think that what we're saying is that the race and class experience is very interactive. And so the working-class experience of schools is very similar to, for white students is very similar to other students of colour as well.

00:13:45 Shabna

And so again, we often get pitted against each other. And I would argue some of the real issues that white working-class students face within our schooling systems are very similar to the experiences that other Black, Caribbean working-class students will have faced as well. So again, I think there's different ways of denying it, but all of it comes back to trying to put it on to communities and individuals and families rather than the schools themselves.

00:14:12 Claire

Yeah, thank you.

00:14:13 Claire

On the project, we work with ideas around reparative education and thinking about how reparations are not just material, but to do with resources, but also knowledge, so epistemic reparation and thinking around curriculum definitely comes into that. So I was just wondering whether reparative justice features in your thinking, in your work.

00:14:40 Shabna

Yeah, so we very recently in October of this year, November maybe of last year, sorry, published a report on reparations and each we had, we didn't claim to be the authority on

reparations. I think there are so many different organisations and groups that have been doing this work for very many years. And so what we wanted to do was commission each of those organisations to offer an insight into what reparations looks like and what kind of reparatory justice looks like from their perspective.

00:15:14 Shabna

And so that was from drugs policy through to land justice, through to the media, so The Guardian and The Guardian's experience of like discovering that actually they were owned by the Scott family, et cetera, and how they've tried to compensate for what they know were the roots of the wealth that brought them The Guardian and all of its publications.

00:15:39 Shabna

And one of those chapters was about education and the school curriculum. I think for us, the whole project and that whole report was very much about thinking that I think as you do as well, that reparations isn't about correcting a past historical injustice. It is talking about the active and persistent kind of inequalities that are here and now, and they persist through, for example, drugs policy, land ownership, and through the education system.

00:16:09 Shabna

And so in particular, the education chapter was written by Lavinya Stennett from the Black Curriculum. And so she was writing around how building a more anti-racist curriculum was part of reparatory justice because it is about addressing and acknowledging those past injustices and visibilising them in our curriculum. And I think that that's what we have done and do through our work anyway.

00:16:40 Shabna

It might not have been called reparatory justice, but each of the, whether it's the Lit in Colour programme, which is talking about writers of colour in English literature, or Visualise, which was about art education, what we are saying is that there is a historical illiteracy in the current curriculum and what we kind of offer, that these things are erasing kind of the past that we have and the people that we have have contemporaneously in each of these subject areas. And so it might not have been called kind of reparatory justice, but it's precisely that, it's trying to kind of address the past injustices, but to move that forward as well.

00:17:21 Claire

Yeah, and I'm just, while you're talking, I was thinking about the art curriculum specifically, because I know Indigenous Australian art is often used in secondary curriculum. And on

the face of it, it's sort of sold as like, this is great, this is diverse, we're including art from around the world. But when you look at it, it's because they feel that it's really easy for children to replicate. It's just, you know, it's lots of dots. And so it's nice and easy to teach, you can do that. And that just totally erases the cultural significance of that art. And I guess what you're looking at with Lit in Colour for English Lit and your art work is not just how do we include more, but how do we teach differently about this?

00:18:02 Shabna

Yeah, I think that's a really important point. And actually the point that you raised about the Aboriginal art or Indigenous art is that we found that there was an over-representation of so-called ancient civilisational art but like a complete erasure of contemporary artists that are kind of being showcased at the Tate and who are there who are active like active in our art world right now and that none of that was registered so it's still this idea of kind of what was 'primitive' art and this is kind of, you know, the art contributions belong over there, they're kind of historical, but the contemporary art scene is really about kind of what the white aesthetic almost.

00:18:43 Shabna

It is about addressing the historic, the historic failures and I think that the curriculum assessment review process that you talked about at the beginning was an opportunity, the government had obviously opened an opportunity for us to engage and talk about what should be on the curriculum, which is what we, as an organisation, that's our *raison d'être* we kind of want to engage with the policy opportunities when they arise. And so we were really encouraged, we put forward all of our research and were involved in conversations.

00:19:18 Shabna

But I think that the report, I think it's probably fair to say, we were disappointed with the recommendations that came out because I think it still stays in that space of voluntary and optional and encouragement to do stuff, which to us is the status quo as it is currently.

00:19:36 Shabna

People have the option of doing more and including writers of colour, but there are all the barriers that we know whether it's kind of time poverty or this kind of fixation on grades and getting certain grades that teachers will feel scared, schools feel scared to go from the kind of the texts they know, *An Inspector Calls*, you know, you've been taught for decades, all the materials, all the resources there for it.

00:20:02 Shabna

And so we were disappointed that the recommendations from that review process still just stayed with, I think there was an active encouragement of more social justice, of more inclusion and diversity in the curriculum. But we wanted, and so we talk in the language that we don't even want to talk about it being kind of mandatory or prescriptive. We think that all children are entitled to having a broad and inclusive and diverse and anti-racist curriculum. And that's for all children, it's not about Black and brown children just being able to see themselves. We know that all children need to be able to see each other in order to value what, yeah, what each of us bring.

00:20:50 Claire

Absolutely, and at the moment that's so dependent on which school you go to and where you live, isn't it? You know, I know some schools are doing great things with really diverse anti-racist curricula and, you know, some schools are just sticking to the status quo and I think that probably goes back to that notion of teacher confidence that you were talking about at the start. You know, if we're not teaching teachers through their initial teacher training to talk about anti-racism and to be anti-racist, then they're going to just do what's easiest.

00:21:23 Claire

And like you say, if the school have been teaching this for years, all the resources are there. And curricula, I guess, are being narrowed so much with academy chains saying, you know, 'here's the curriculum model that you're going to teach, all the schools in the academy chain are going to do that', there's very little room for teacher personalisation and, you know, adapting things to the needs of their students.

00:21:44 Shabna

Yeah, I really agree with that. And I think that not only is there the issue of teacher confidence, which as you and I have both kind of agreed, teachers are not trained to deal with these issues or conversations at all. But actually, I think there's been an active imposition by the state and by government to create more anxiety around these conversations.

00:22:09 Shabna

So I remember Gavin Williamson, so he was Secretary of State, Secretary of State of Education, just toward the end of my teaching career. And there was the whole conversation around Palestine and Ukraine. And it felt really clear, I think, to lots of people that there was a different treatment of Ukraine...

00:22:28 Claire

Absolutely.

00:22:29 Shabna

...and the discussion of that in schools versus how we could talk about Palestine. And I remember students talking to me very, very kind of like emotionally drained by having to navigate. "I feel totally unsure of how I can speak about these things because everyone's talking about Ukraine, but I'm not allowed to talk about Palestine."

00:22:53 Shabna

And his intervention at the time was about balance and, you know, 'you must be balanced,' and 'you must not....' And, and I think that made it worse for teachers because I think teachers were then more fearful about what does balance mean, what does... And then the discussion about Critical Race Theory and whether that is an ideological and politically loaded term to use in schools. Again, I think all of these interventions have been deeply unhelpful and actually eroded confidence of teachers to be able to address these things because then there's the fear that they're, you know, behaving politically in the classroom. Yeah.

00:23:32 Claire

I remember going back to sort of my teacher training in 2007, 2008, being politically neutral meant that you didn't promote a political party in your classroom, which absolutely fine. You know, we can all get on board with that and agree that, yeah, if you're, you know, so when I used to teach my class about the elections, I made, I was really careful not to say which political party I preferred. I'd do things like put the manifestos up without the name on and we'd go through and look at the actual policies and things.

00:24:01 Claire

But it seems to have been interpreted now in the current climate to just don't talk about politics, which is really damaging, isn't it? Because we're not developing that political literacy in teachers and therefore not in students.

00:24:12 Shabna

Yeah, and I think that we're, and I think there's colleagues at Birmingham University, Professor Karl Kitching recently published a report, their team published a report around faith and faith literacy in schools, and really talked about how students were saying that they no longer trusted the classroom as a space in which they could have these discussions. They would kind of censor themselves and edit themselves in the

conversations in class. And so where were they taking these conversations? They were taking these conversations online and in their friendship groups. And then you don't have kind of an adult to help you critically engage and interrogate and examine what's being said. And so you lose the opportunity for those teaching moments and for us to say, "look, hang on a minute, that view, is that really what you think? Let's dissect that." And you can't have those conversations if students and teachers are too scared to have them. And that's a real loss. That's like a real indictment of our education system where students are withdrawing from conversations in classrooms because they don't trust those spaces anymore.

00:25:16 Claire

Yeah, and I remember a conversation during my teaching career with a year 11, so 15, 16-year-old boy, who he said, "the problem is that immigrants are coming over here and they're taking our jobs." And traditionally in school, people would just shut that down and say, "you cannot say that." But a colleague and I said, well, let's sit down with him and ask him why he thinks that. And when we said, "Where did this come from? Why do you think that?" he said, "because it's on the front page of a newspaper."

00:25:45 Claire

And after some probing, it turned out that he wasn't aware that everything in a newspaper isn't the truth. He thought that for it to be on the front page of a newspaper, it had to be true. And so if we didn't have that conversation, we wouldn't have had that opportunity to talk to him about an editorial stance of a paper. And he was very reasonable and open to listening. And not all people who hold those views for sure are going to be that reasonable and open to listening. But it would have been a missed opportunity.

00:26:15 Claire

And I think we've already started talking about this, but my next question was around the fact that education and schools have the potential to counter some of the inequality that happens in wider society, but actually they far too often replicate and enable it. And so I wanted to talk about the wider context of the rise of the far right and the increase in racism over sort of recent years and months. And how's that linked to what's going on in schools?

00:26:43 Shabna

I think that the riots from last year, or the year before now, wasn't it? It's the year before now, we're in 2026. So I think that the riots and seeing the number of children, young people who were out and involved in some of those things was really shocking for me. And

there were so many social media posts where you did see kind of parents out with their children on some of these so-called demonstrations.

00:27:15 Shabna

And I think that the rise of the far right, the normalisation of what would have been exceptional and abhorrent ideas before has become totally normalised. So the kind of statement that you shared about the year 11 boy, that's kind of just on the front page of a newspaper and uninterrogated and unchallenged, right? And so I think that we've seen the real creep of what were exceptional ideas become totally normal.

00:27:46 Shabna

And therefore, children and young people who are subjected to that as part of their normal conversation and part of the conversation that the media and politicians are having, there's absolutely no way that they're gonna escape the fact that that is happening and that's part of the way in which the political environment and the social environment, growing up.

00:28:06 Shabna

And so I think that it is really worrying that we have this shift in our political climate. It's one that's global. We can see what's happening across Europe, across the world, India. We know that this is happening, the shift to the far right, and we've seen that expressed in the riots and so on. We've also seen it expressed in schools in a really sad way in terms of the numbers of exclusions related to racist incidents, so I think they've more than doubled in the last year. So pupils who have been excluded for short-term suspensions, but for racist incidents.

00:28:43 Shabna

And again, that shows that schools, A, that things are happening in schools, because children and young people are not divorced from the world that we live in, but B, that schools aren't able to deal with it, because I think it's shocking that children who are being excluded for those reasons, I think that we, we generally do not like to see exclusions in schools. We think schools are responsible places for dealing with all of the kind of facets of teaching children. And so for us, we aren't pleased that teachers and schools are resorting to exclusions for racist incidents. We don't think that's the way to deal with racism. You have to talk to children just like you described.

00:29:25 Shabna

So I think that we are seeing those expressions of the far right in school interactions. And I really hoped that the curriculum assessment review was going to be an opportunity to deal

with some of that. And that is exactly what we put to the review panel through the process was that we are seeing this shocking rise of far-right politics. It is being normalised, our children are growing up saturated in this from all of their kind of social media, as well as the mainstream media and the political conversation. The curriculum in schools have to be a place that are going to challenge that.

00:30:07 Shabna

And this is where, again, this isn't...I think that this is not a moral mission, this is not, in many ways, it's not a moral mission and it's not, it's about accuracy, it's about if we want to have a real, if we want to claim we have a knowledge-rich curriculum, a knowledge-rich curriculum needs to address the fact that there are huge gaping holes in our history curriculum, in our English curriculum, which do not share the experiences of the multicultural country that we are, or the reason for why we are the country that we are. And the curriculum is aiding and supporting far-right ideas when it doesn't try to try and counteract that, if you get what I mean?

00:30:51 Claire

Yeah, absolutely.

00:30:52 Shabna

So yeah, so I think it is having a really clear impact on schools. I also think that the wider, like I think you described earlier, the process of academisation and the way in which schools and education has become commodified, marketised, we're all kind of about spreadsheets and I know certainly for me, one of the push factors out of school was that my students were all colours on a spreadsheet.

00:31:22 Shabna

So if they were red, then I was in trouble. If they were green, then I was fine. And that was obviously the red and greens are kind of indicators of their progress according to the data, which told me where they should be at a given point in time.

00:31:36 Shabna

So we think that the way in which schools operate fundamentally, both around curriculum and the incentives that drive them, are really not helping us to deal with the problem of the far right and the racism that we're seeing, which is leading, it's not just an impact on Black and brown communities, it is leading to the breakdown of all of our communities and all of us suffer as a result as well.

00:31:59 Claire

Where's the sort of hope in the system? Are there, is there, we know there's not the political will to change this, but is there the will to change this anywhere in the system? Where are those kind of hopeful spots?

00:32:10 Shabna

Yeah, I think that's a really interesting one because I think that where we have struggled with the government and different governments, not just the Labour government, there are lots of other stakeholders and actors in the education ecosystem who have been more receptive and encouraging of some of these changes.

00:32:29 Shabna

So for example, with Visualise, our education report, one of the things we did was we worked with exam boards through doing the research and then we were quite able to, we were able to say, look, you don't put artists of colour in your exam specifications and that's leading to some of the reasons for why further down people don't study them. And so they changed, they put, you know, all of the exam boards through that process, then committed to increasing the representation of artists of colour.

00:33:02 Shabna

And they did, there was, I think there was 144% increase in the number of artists of color that were represented in art GCSE specifications across all the exam boards. So I think there are actors within the broader education system who are willing and are wanting to make changes.

00:33:22 Shabna

But I think that we always reach a blocker because again, you have individual teachers, individual schools, some exam boards who really want to drive and encourage more progressive and inclusive curriculum. But to have that universal experience, we do need government policy to really curate that.

00:33:45 Claire

And I guess the work keeps going. So what's next for the Runnymede Trust?

00:33:51 Shabna

So this year, in terms of our education policy, we've got two key priorities. So we know that the curriculum assessment review report made recommendations. And what will happen now is that there is a process of the new curriculum will be drafted. So this will be the first time we have a proper national curriculum since the academisation of education, because

the new curriculum will now, academies will not be able to opt out. So this will actually go back to being a proper national curriculum.

00:34:20 Shabna

So for us, the recommendations may not have been as strong as we wanted, but there is an opportunity for each of these different subject areas which are now drafting the curriculum guidance and then exam boards will draft their exam specifications. Those are all opportunities for us to try and be involved and try to shape the writing of those curriculum pieces. So that's one priority for us is to be as engaged and involved in shaping that as far as we can.

00:34:49 Shabna

And the second piece that sits under that is around the teacher education piece. All of our research comes back to you can change the curriculum, you can change exam specifications. But if teachers don't feel confident about dealing with these things in their classroom, then they will avoid it. And so actually, I think that one of the things that even if you include more, this is one of the things that I was saying about the artists of colour, that teachers will often teach around the periphery of it. So we might have texts that now reference more Black characters, for example, through the Lit in Colour programme, but teachers will still avoid dealing with the kind of the issues because they don't feel confident so they'll skirt around it. And that, again, that's been something that we've observed through seeing how teachers who've tried to incorporate new texts have done it without necessarily full confidence because of that.

00:35:43 Shabna

So the second thing is to try and work out how do we support the kind of initial teacher education programmes, how do we support continuing professional development for teachers to make sure that we build teacher confidence?

00:35:57 Claire

Great and I think you know myself and I think lots of our listeners will be following that with interest to see what happens.

00:36:05 Claire

So we'll move on to our final question, which is what would a just education system look like to you?

00:36:13 Shabna

Oh gosh, so it would look entirely different to the system that we have currently. I think that I've got, as well as having been a teacher and obviously doing this work around policy influencing now, I have two children who've been through the education system who are in year 10 and now in year 12. And I think that education needs to be so wholly and completely different because I think the love of learning has been completely stripped away from our school experience.

00:36:46 Shabna

And I think that the marketisation, the academisation of schools has really made us fixate on grades and outcomes in a way that really does not think about children and young people in terms of their whole selves. I think the pastoral element of schools has really been denigrated.

00:37:07 Shabna

So for me, I think a just education system requires a huge investment of funding. I think it requires us to value teachers and to value all of the other people that build school communities that you need, mental health support in schools, you need to have school nurses, you need to have all of the people that build schools as genuine communities to support children and young people.

00:37:41 Shabna

I think we need curriculum that encourages children to imagine a future that can be completely different to what it is now. I think, again, one of the problems is that the social imagination of children is crippled, I think, by our current education system. It is shut down by the way in which we teach children and young people now.

00:38:04 Shabna

So I think the curriculum needs to look entirely different. The systems need to look entirely different. The funding needs to look entirely different.

00:38:12 Shabna

But I do think it's possible. And I think that when you said that, you know, it feels hard and where's the hope? I, you know, I am always hopeful. I'm always hopeful that actually things can get better.

00:38:24 Shabna

And even when we kind of are looking at a 2026 which has had the wildest start with Trump and Venezuela and kind of think what can happen if, you know, I still do feel like there are

enough good people in the world working towards a more progressive and just future that these things will happen and there is lots of kind of bad things happening, but there are enough good people quietly and kind of with a lot of commitment doing this work behind the scenes. It might not be loud, it might not be visible, but it is going on. So yeah, that does give me hope.

00:39:00 Claire

Great. And I think that's a perfect place to end. So yeah, here's to hope. Thank you so much.

00:39:05 Shabna

Thank you.

00:39:07 Claire

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