

## 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.

00:00:20 Claire

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

So welcome to another episode of the Repair-Ed podcast. My guest today is Curtis from Class Divide, a grassroots campaign for educational inequality in Brighton and Hove. Morning, Curtis.

00:00:47 Curtis

Good morning.

00:00:48 Claire

Would you like to introduce yourself and tell us a bit more about your campaign?

00:00:53 Curtis

Yeah, sure. So I'm Curtis James. And I'm one of the co-founders of the campaign group called Class Divide.

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Which is...sort of grew out of East Brighton, obviously a city on the South Coast. That's where I grew up, it's where I went to school.

00:01:10 Curtis

And we started the campaign about five years ago after doing a Freedom of Information request that basically told us kind of what we had a hunch was happening, which was there was a huge attainment gap between kids in the area that I grew up in and the rest of the campaign members were living and still some of the kids going to school in.

00:01:30 Curtis

And the rest of the city. There's a 40% attainment gap, which had been going on for decades and that really kicked off

00:01:37 Curtis

I guess the last five years of campaigning, which we'll no doubt will get into as we chat more later, but my background is

00:01:45 Curtis

Growing up in that area, going to school in that area, I didn't do so well at school and I have had all sorts of jobs since then, which you can ask me about at some point. But you know, but one of them is making radio and podcasts, which is how I ended up making the Class Divide podcast, which came out a couple of years ago and we're still making episodes now.

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Great. Thank you. Yeah, I'm sure our listeners would love to check that out.

00:02:13 Claire

So our project Repair-Ed focuses on educational inequality in the city of Bristol, which is often

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Described as a divided city and along with race, one of the lenses through which we're viewing inequality is class. On your website you say that, "the class divide in Brighton and Hove's education system is no longer an open secret."

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Which really resonates with us and how education in Bristol is viewed. Can you share a bit more about the class inequality that you see in Brighton?

00:02:42 Curtis

Yeah, sure. I mean, I think this is something that's coming up a lot at the moment, right, because there's an, you know, we're we're in what January and there is a consultation going on around changing school catchment areas and admissions criteria.

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For those that know Brighton, I guess what you might imagine about Brighton is this sort of picture postcard sort of view of the seaside and of this affluent place where everyone's living a lovely life by the sea.

00:03:12 Curtis

And but you don't need to venture that far out of the city centre to realise

00:03:17 Curtis

that not everyone's life is like that. Not everyone's living in super expensive houses and has access and advantages to, you know, the things that that money and and that sort of privilege can get you. And so and and that plays out in all sorts of areas from housing.

00:03:35 Curtis

And and obviously the area we're most interested in education.

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Just to give you a little example of that sort of inequality.

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And you know, it is based around class I think. You know there is in one school in Brighton where a lot of kids from the area I grew up in.

00:03:54 Curtis

Go to it's predicted to have 68% of its children on free school meals next year.

00:04:00 Curtis

Whereas another school not very far away where many kids go to from more advantaged areas.

00:04:07 Curtis

Has around 20% of its children non free school meals and it's a big thing that we're sort of campaigning for to try and change that lack of social mix and desegregate the school system. So you know, it's one really what feels to me like, glaringly obvious class divide in the city.

00:04:24 Claire

Yeah, I think that's that's really similar to Bristol with

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Schools, you know, even in areas of relatively high deprivation, their catchment areas taking from the more affluent side of the school and there's huge disparity.

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In pupil premium and free school meals numbers across the city. So, and I think what really resonated as well was your description of what Brighton is to people - that

wealthy seaside town. And I think you know, Bristol's the same. We've got the suspension bridge, we've got, you know, all of those lovely coloured terrace houses.

00:05:02 Claire

And that's not the reality of Bristol, for for many. So yeah, I can see.

00:05:08 Claire

A lot of.

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Similarities between the two.

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So how about your, your campaign and you know, can you share some of the success you've had so far?

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Yeah. So I think, so there's a few different things that have happened since we started. I have to say, actually the first couple of years we we were campaigning.

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It was a real, it was like trudging through mud, you know, getting the local authority to listen to us, to engage with us was very, very difficult. And part of the reason is because historically, Brighton & Hove City Council.

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Has not had a majority for for, for decades, and so you've had these sort of warring factions of minority parties, and then it being very difficult to make change happen. So and education has always been a really sticky, frightening thing for councillors to get involved in.

00:05:58 Claire

Absolutely

00:05:59 Curtis

So that's there's a bit of context there.

00:06:01 Curtis

But I I guess one of the first successes we had and it's, you know relatively minor in the scheme of things, but very big for the families that it impacted.

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20 years ago, the local school closed down. The school I went to and what it meant was that all the kids in the area that I grew up in had to now travel much further to get to school for the first few years they were given free travel and somehow that just slipped away. We don't quite know exactly when it happened, but that slipped away.

00:06:30 Curtis

What we have done over the last few years is enable all children in White Hawk, part of East Brighton, to get free transport to school. So that's one thing. Another thing we did was arrange for there to be an extra after school bus because the other thing that was happening was

00:06:47 Curtis

Kids from our area weren't able to take part in after school activities because the school buses would leave too early, so we pushed for there to be an extra bus that left later so kids could take part in that stuff. So they're two around transport.

00:07:01 Curtis

Probably the biggest thing is this time last year.

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We we won probably one of our most sort of biggest victories, which was enabling kids on free school meals to be given priority in the school admissions process.

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Which hasn't been done anywhere in the country. It's a first for policy across the country.

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And what that means is now that schools have to admit up to the city percentage of free school meals into their individual schools.

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Which you know is part of the job, I think of desegregating schools.

00:07:39 Curtis

It gives an opportunity for kids in, say, the area I grew up in to if they're on free school meals to pick a school in any part of the city.

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So that that was quite a big success for us and I guess the stuff that's happening now is the next step for that, which we can talk about if you like.

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Yeah. So that's that's huge, isn't it? The

00:08:03 Claire

the kids, the free school meals being given priority and as you say, that hasn't happened anywhere.

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Why? Why was that an important thing for you? How do you think that's going to change the chances for those children?

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Well, I mean.

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I think it's

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Probably important to say that for us it was seen as the first step.

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You know we, you know, like free school meals is a very, I think lazy way to sort of measure the needs of the school system and those that need the most support in it. But it is the way that most people.

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Absolutely.

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It is the metric which is used the most.

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And I think we saw that as

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A good start to introduce some sort of balance in the school system. You know, there's there's a lot of research out there that shows that a better mix of children from different social backgrounds in the school system.

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has all sorts of benefits. And so that was one reason, probably the most important reason was that

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You know, parents in the area that I grew up in

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up until that point, have no choice of school. They they they have to go to a particular school. They only have one catchment school in their catchment area.

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That just feels unfair to me when so many others in the city have a choice of multiple schools, so again, it was part of that introducing, you know, some choice, introducing some balance in the school system that felt really important. It's not perfect.

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that policy change isn't perfect because you know one of the things

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That you know it is part of it is how kids get to school. So you could be a parent on free school meals with your child on free school meals. You could have that choice. But if you can't afford to get your kids to a school a little bit further away

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Then that's also a barrier, so it's not the perfect change, but it was what we felt a very important first step.

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And it's interesting that transport comes up because one of the things that we've been finding in Bristol.

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Um

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It hasn't come up yet in terms of going to school, probably because we're working with primary education and so most children do go to their local primary school.

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But teachers are saying there's all this amazing resource in the city. You know, we've got libraries, we've got museums, we've got things which are free.

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But the children don't go because getting a bus from, you know, the outskirts where they live to the city centre, the costs are going up and up. So transport is a big thing which comes up when we're talking about class inequality.

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Especially it just you know, if you if you don't have a car, public transport is so expensive, there's nothing within walking distance, it's it's coming up as a huge issue.

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Yeah, I mean just to add to that, one of the things that we've done recently is started to work with the new MP for the area.

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He asked a question actually in Parliament a couple of months ago, to the Education Secretary around transport to see if we can start pushing at changing some of the rules around how that works and who's entitled to it. So at the moment

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there's, like a three-mile rule which enables your entitlement to a free bus pass to school, and we're trying to get that changed so it's 2 miles, maybe less. I mean, obviously the idea is all kids get free transport to school, right? But you know, like I guess we've got to push at this and and see where we can get to in the in the shorter term. And the ideal is free transport.

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But so we are, we're looking at this on a national policy level as well because that's kind of where the changes need to happen. That's kind of what's holding local authorities back from making real changes.

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Yeah, absolutely. And it's, you know, just that that small thing about putting that extra bus on at the end of the day is so powerful.

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And it just I I guess that reminds me of how certain things which are put in place to support children, such as a bus home from school.

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Schools and local authorities don't often think of the unintended inequality they're creating by doing things like only putting on one bus, you know that then creates a



divide between children who can attend after school clubs enriching their curriculum, and you know their provision and those who can't.

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So yeah, it's really interesting.

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On our project, we're we're engaging schools, parents, community knowledge holders.

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So people who have lived in their local communities for years, it might be faith leaders or school governors or, you know, pillars of the community who who really know what's going on in that area. And we're hoping to open up dialogue across the city of Bristol. So we'd be really interested to know how you've built your movement up.

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So from sort of, you know you and a couple of others who were really passionate about this to a real movement that's that's engaging on a, well, on a national level. Now you've you've mentioned.

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I wouldn't say it's say it's been an easy journey and I don't think it's perfect now, you know, I don't think we've got anywhere near enough people as part of the movement, but I think you know

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When when the campaign started, the first thing we did and it felt like probably the most important thing to do, was to tell the story from the community's perspective of what was going wrong. So the first thing we did was we had a zine designed.

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Small sort of paper magazine for those that don't know what a zine is.

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And we had thousands of them printed, and we hand-delivered them to every household in the community and that, that zine told the story from the perspective of families rather than experts, rather than the school system.

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About what was going on with the education system, you know what? What? What's happened for a long, long time? It still happens now. is often parents are told it's not the school's problem. It's you. It's the parents.

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You're not doing the right thing or your kids not engaging or you don't have big enough aspirations or.

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So parents are often blamed, and there's a suggestion that it's nothing to do with the system. We wanted to sort of rewrite that story and say to parents, this isn't your fault. You're in a broken system and you know, this is the beginning of us sort of rising up against that, really.

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And I, you know, I think that was really, really helpful because I think for the first time in a long time, parents sort of

00:14:59 Curtis

Had this sort of new story to tell themselves, that it wasn't their fault.

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And yeah, I think that was super powerful. You know, lots of meetings, lots of events and then a couple of years ago, we released the podcast, which I think, you know, did a few things.

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I I wanted to.

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Tell the historical story.

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Of the failures in the school system for families in the area that I grew up in, you know, not just about educational, also about council estates and about stigma and specifically in Brighton, you know how the council estate that we all grew up on came about, you know, through clearance of slums in the city centre and how that

00:15:46 Curtis

Created from the start, stigma and negative perception about the kind of people that were living in those areas.

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And how all of that played into the school system, you know, into all the services that are designed to support people.

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In those areas.

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So I think that also obviously had an impact. I think I think we've had about 30,000 people listen to the podcast series so far.

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And so, I mean, I think it's just grinding away. You know, it's basically trying to speak to as many people as possible.

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Yeah, I mean, God, we haven't always got it right. You know, we're not experts in it. We just try to do whatever we can and include as many people as possible.

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What you're saying is coming out in our.

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In our research as well, I mean community knowledge holders

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In parts of Bristol, similar parts to where you're talking about.

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Where you know, there's been council estates created by slum clearance

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Have have talked about that stigma and how difficult it is to break away from there and you know we've had participants saying, "people always complain about this part of Bristol when I'm not sure, if they've even ever been there," you know, there's just this mythology of place that's built up.

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I'm interested in whether any schools have got involved?

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And do schools support what you're doing, or have you found a lot of resistance there?

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That's been an interesting sort of transition, I think. And when we started, I would say.

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We were angry with everyone.

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Because it's hard not to be angry about it. You know, I've got my own personal story about my failure in at school and and

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You know and everyone involved in the campaign does as well, and it's it's anger inducing. And so I think when we first started, we didn't really have relationships with the schools.

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And.

00:17:57 Curtis

I'm really, really pleased that over the years, you know, I feel like we've worked really hard to build that, to build that trust, to work with schools in any way we can, and I'd like to say now we have really strong relationships with the head teachers, with the schools that look after the children from the estate.

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And there's a kind of relationships we can still challenge stuff, but also that we know there's a mutual support but also

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For us, our biggest fear that there is another school will be closed in the community and and so there's a sort of joint responsibility, I think where we're like, you know, we will do whatever we can to support

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That from not happening because we know that the damage it it did to the community.

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So yeah, I mean I think

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You know, I mean one particular project that I think was really, really useful as we, together with a whole bunch of people. We did a mentoring programme in one of the secondary schools, so we helped find a bunch of people to come in and mentor students in in one of the schools.

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And it's just been really powerful. I think, you know, I think it's brought people from all sorts of different backgrounds into into a school that like you say, often people are like, Oh yeah, I've heard the mythologies about that place.

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And then these people come and spend some time in the place and chat with young people and realise the stories they've heard aren't quite reality. So that that was really powerful.

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And just including some of them on the podcast and you know, the heads have all been on the podcast at some point. So I think that's been really useful to hear from their perspective. You know what they're doing and what they're trying to do.

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Yeah, absolutely. I'm also interested in, I guess because in Bristol, we're looking, we're working in 10 wards across the city.

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Ranging from very, very deprived areas of the city to really affluent areas, so we're trying to get a sense of how educational inequality is shaped across the city of Bristol.

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and we're specifically looking for differences in experience to try and to try and see that.

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So some of the schools that we're working with.

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We're working with academies and local authority schools and also a couple of independent schools because we're trying to understand education as a whole.

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So I guess.

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You've talked a lot about a specific area of Brighton.

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Are you bringing people together from different areas across the city and how does that work?

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Yeah, we are. We're trying, I mean, you know, up until this recent consultation period, which you know is a slightly separate affair, which we can talk about in a second. I mean one of the things we did last year was which kind of came out of the podcast.

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We were commissioned by Brighton Festival to they kind of approached us saying, well, we've heard the podcast. Could you do something like that but in the festival?

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And we came up with this idea of working with a sound artist and which we'd already thought about doing actually. We wanted to make the final episode of the first series with young people, and there was a sound artist we were going to work with.

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To do that.

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And the festival thing came along. We're like, right, let's turn this into a show. We'll turn this into a thing that is made by young people, and it sort of turned into this whole exhibition that we put on in the city centre.

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So basically, the audience was the city centre like we won over everyone locally. We didn't need to put it on in White Hawk in East Brighton. So we have the city centre gallery.

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This amazing soundscape that a whole lot of young people

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Had made.

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And.

00:21:57 Curtis

And a whole lot of historical context as well. And then also part of that was the Class Divide story. So the sound artist would often say, you know.

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“Come for the drones. Come for the sound art, but actually you end up finding out loads about inequality in the city.” As part of this Brighton festival sort of show. So that's one thing that we've done that

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I think has attempted to get people to find out about the story to get be a part of it.

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Who may not even be aware that these things exist in the city and I have to say, you know that and the podcast, you know, we have a lot of volunteers and a lot of them aren't actually from East Brighton. They're from all over the city.

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So people are engaging with this from all sorts of different backgrounds. So I'd like to think it's done its job, some of that stuff, this sort of

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Opening it out and telling stories to different audiences.

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Yeah, and storytelling so powerful, isn't it? Where we've created a People's History of Schooling, which is an online interactive map where people can read and listen to the the stories from former pupils,

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current educators and community knowledge holders, and there's something really powerful about being able to

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To take those stories and combine them, and you know, see them as a as a whole, and that soundscape sounds really exciting. Really interesting. One of the things we're going to be looking at on the Repair-Ed project is public engagement events

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Where people can come and learn and then hopefully share with us their own experiences.

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And education is something that's so universal, isn't it? I think, you know people. People are interested even if they don't have children in schools and

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It'd be great to hear a bit more about your work with

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The local authority and your local MP you mentioned, so sort of bringing it more to the systematic level. I'm really interested about what you said

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Earlier, when you said that

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Schools sort of feel like, oh, it's it's not their fault, it's the system. But you know, the system isn't this sort of thing that exists on its own. The system is built up by people and by institutions.

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So how do you engage on that systemic level?

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Yeah, as I said before, the first couple of years of trying to do that was very, very difficult.

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You know, we had a Green council that were, you know, in a minority, and I think it was very difficult for them to engage and COVID had just happened or was still happening. So there's a lot of other stuff going on. Don't want to just say they didn't care because that that clearly isn't the case, but.

00:24:54 Curtis

I think it.

00:24:57 Curtis

I struggle with it because politics is like tricky, right? There's a political cycle and it's

00:25:05 Curtis



A popularity contest and education, as I said earlier, is one of the scariest things certainly in Brighton & Hove because there's history, you know, I've heard rumours of councillors having breakdowns over recent, you know, consultations on changing education stuff because of the amount of pressure they get from certain areas.

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So I think we've ended up with a situation in Brighton where we have a Labour council now who for a whole lot of reasons, I think just really get it. I think they realise that something has to change.

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Partly because of the podcast, partly because of the years of campaigning and they they

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We have done something that I think is really hard for communities to do, you know, to sort of like course communities have a voice, right? But it being heard and that actually turning into action is a completely different thing.

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And to maintain that sort of

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Pressure is also really, really difficult.

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To feel like you can even have a voice in any of that stuff.

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So I think a mix of just constantly sort of being involved and going to as many meetings like I know more about sort of bus policy and how the bus systems work than any normal human should have to sort of know about!

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But it's sort of that sort of tenacity that I think people in the campaign have had to have.

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Of like, none of us are. Well, I say none of us are experts in policy. Actually, Carly, my co-founder, is a policy person now in an organisation in London working on education inequality. But when we started, she wasn't.

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So we're learning as we go. I think with that stuff, I would say, you know, like I said before

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there was

00:26:59 Curtis

There was a lot of anger at the start and I think as the years have gone by, you realise that anger can only get you so far.

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And that doesn't completely dissipate. But maybe you use it in slightly cleverer ways, I don't know. I mean, I'm. I'm sort of thinking aloud here because, you know, I don't quite know how it's happened, really. I think it is just constant pressure.

00:27:25 Curtis

And constant talking and being open to different ways of doing things.

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And storytelling, as you mentioned you know, I think the power of being able to add narrative to the data, you know the data really only gets you so far and can be spun in all sorts of different ways.

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And actually, you know, going and interviewing lots and lots of people that have been

00:27:51 Curtis

Very seriously impacted by the educational inequality and hearing how that's impacted them on all sorts of levels.

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So really hard to ignore that stuff alongside the data. So I think that has really helped the cause. And yeah, I have to. I have to give sort of

00:28:11 Curtis

I have to have respect for the councillors at the moment in Brighton that I think are doing the thing that a lot of councillors really struggle to do, which is trying to ignore the fact they could be voted out in a few years' time because they're doing some very tricky things.

00:28:28 Curtis

And.

00:28:29 Curtis

In fact, I'm about to work on a new podcast episode.

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About how these changes happen from a council perspective, because I've made I've. I'm basically making three episodes at the moment about this consultation. The first one was from an expert's point of view. Lots of experts and research.

00:28:46

Mm.

00:28:47 Curtis

The second one is from a family perspective and this third one is about the system and how it hinders or doesn't hinder these kinds of changes. And I do think there's a lot of national policy stuff that's really getting in the way of, you know, real change happening in the school system.

00:29:04 Curtis

Locally.

00:29:06 Claire

Yeah. And that's that's really interesting. So I think that's something that people don't know much about, right, the you know, we all think we we we know where the blame is in the system but you know very few of us really understand that

00:29:22 Claire

That political landscape in terms of how it works and how things get changed.

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And so yeah, for you to be delving into that must be really interesting and telling the same story from three different angles is really interesting as well.

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Do you want to tell us a bit more about the, the campaign? You've mentioned it a few times, so let's delve into that.

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Yeah. So back in October, the council announced that they were going to be

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Proposing some new ideas on how catchments and the admissions process, secondary school admissions process works.

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And they had two reasons for doing that. One was falling pupil numbers, which is happening quite dramatically in Brighton, but is also happening across the country.

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Absolutely

00:30:10 Curtis

Obviously because of the way schools are funded, that's going to have a big impact and councils are trying to get ahead of that. You know, before it gets to the point where they feel that they've got to close the school, for example.

00:30:21 Claire

Yeah. So just just there to point out to to listeners who may not know that schools are funded per pupil. So they have, yeah, they have an amount of money per pupil.

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So falling roles, falling numbers of pupils means less money for schools.

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Yeah. Yeah, that's a really important point. So that's one, one of the sort of.

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Sort of. One rationale for for them proposing these changes. The second one was, I guess the thing we've really been pushing at, which was the attainment gap.

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They're looking at the school system and and seeing these huge disparities between the number of free school meals kids in one school and another and going what can we do about that given the levers that we have, the limited levers we have as a local authority, what can we do about that?

00:31:05 Curtis

So the initial part of this process was what they called a sort of conversation. They put forward these three ideas. They wanted the city to, you know, share their thoughts on it - wasn't an official consultation at that point.

00:31:20 Curtis

But those ideas were, you know, from both ends of the spectrum, one was quite extreme, the other at the other end of the spectrum, was was less extreme. Some people in an area where two of the most popular schools are got quite angry about these proposals.

00:31:37 Curtis

The council listened and then in December they announced the the idea they wanted to put forward for the actual consultation. So that's been going on for six weeks, 8 weeks feels like a lifetime.

00:31:51 Curtis

And these proposals have also angered people.

00:31:55 Curtis

And I think

00:31:57 Curtis

It highlights so much that's wrong with the the school system. You know you have

00:32:04 Curtis

A school system at the moment which you know is very much influenced by postcode. Your ability to buy a house in a particular place.

00:32:13 Curtis

By a marketised school system where schools are almost acting like individual businesses, where they have to protect their own, what they're doing and and I don't blame heads and school governors for acting that way. That's the way the system's set up. That's the way they're measured.

00:32:28 Curtis

It but it what it means is you have winners and losers. You have people that are really able to engage with that system for a multitude of reasons. They might have more money and the ability to move into a house in a certain area so they can go to the so-called best schools.

00:32:47 Curtis

And then you have what might be described as the losers, those with no choice and no ability to move or, you know, go private or leave town, or who are stuck, who are stuck in a system.

00:33:01 Curtis

Where their choice or lack of choice means they go to the school that has the most kids on free school meals.

00:33:10 Curtis

And and, you know, research shows that those schools are less likely to attract the most experienced teachers.

00:33:17 Curtis

They have earlier start times. They're trickier to get to a whole whole load of reasons why those schools have a much rawer deal.

00:33:26 Curtis

So yeah, it's it's really I think

00:33:30 Curtis

Shone a light on the disparities, but also in Brighton, and this is what the second episode of the podcast series that I'm sort of the miniseries I'm making about this talks about is this sort of. I mean, the episode's called 'The Privilege Paradox'.

00:33:46 Curtis

And I talked about

00:33:49 Curtis

How you know Brighton is this open

00:33:52 Curtis

Inclusive, friendly place where lots of people wear their sort of beliefs and the things they would campaign for on their sleeve and and would be out marching for all sorts of things. But actually when it comes to individual children,

00:34:08 Curtis

It's a very, very difficult thing for someone to go. "Yeah. OK. I believe in, I believe in progressive ways of schooling. I believe in that fairness, but I still want my child to go to that school that's right near my house."

00:34:23 Curtis

And so that is one of the arguments, you know. And yeah, it's it's I have to say it's not been a very nice 8 weeks.

00:34:34 Curtis

Because it's been a, you know, a very lively debate.

00:34:39 Claire

What are, what are some of the the challenges or you know the what's some of the anger around from those schools and more affluent areas?

00:34:54 Curtis

Well, schools have only just released their response to it, but so it's mainly it's mainly parents who are sort of angry about it. I mean, I would say the number one thing is distance to school. I think a lot of parents

00:35:09 Curtis

Are angry that you know they they. I guess they've told themselves a story for quite a long time. "I live in this area. There's those two schools that are within half an hour of where I live. My kid can walk to that school."

00:35:22 Curtis

And obviously, you know, for anyone listening that's not aware, no one's guaranteed a place in any school, no matter how close you are to it. With the way that our admissions and catchments works. So even though you would like to think

00:35:39 Curtis

That you are guaranteed a place in a certain school because you've bought a house nearby. That isn't, unfortunately, how the school system works. And so I think it's a a nasty reality check for people.

00:35:52 Curtis

The thing that has caused the most anger is, I would say the misuse of of some of the data that's been sort of put out. There's a particular group that's trying to fight against changes

00:36:06 Curtis

And they have shared some sort of quite misleading stats about what will happen if these proposals go through. And, you know, I want to be careful about how I talk about this because I know there's a lot of sensitivity around it and it's a very

00:36:20 Curtis

You know current topic that is upsetting a lot of people, you know.

00:36:27 Curtis

But it's been really unhelpful. You know, there's been, there's been some scare tactics that have made a lot of families feel very threatened and and like, the situation's going to be really bad for them when actually the the data, the, the reality is the data is a bit different and not quite as bad as

00:36:47 Curtis

It's being portrayed, but I think it just highlights you know, we've been here a few times over the last 20 years in Brighton, there's been attempts to change the system

00:36:56 Curtis

To make it fairer and every time the council have got sort of this far and they've had to do a U-turn because they face so much pressure.

00:37:07 Curtis

From families that

00:37:11

Are sort

00:37:12 Curtis

Of yeah, I guess there's an expectation that they want the school that they've moved near to and

00:37:18 Curtis

You know, as long as they're OK, then you know then that that's sort of OK for them. And like I say, I wanna, I need to be so careful. You know, in all honesty, I've it's the first time I think the campaign and also me personally have faced a lot of anger

00:37:34 Curtis

And quite a lot of nastiness online about this stuff. So and and I have compassion for some of those feelings, you know, I do, but I also

00:37:44 Curtis

I also have an issue of of like

00:37:46 Curtis



You know sometimes I want to say these consultations. They should be done in the first instance and only have involvement with people that don't have kids that are about to go to secondary school.

00:37:58 Curtis

Because I'm really interested in what the city thinks about how the school system should work, not with people that are right at the sort of raw edge of it.

00:38:07 Curtis

And then those people should be asked, but it should. There should be a better way of having these debates around

00:38:13 Curtis

You know, why does a city need education? You know, it's a good for all, right? It's a good for everyone in the city, not just parents who have kids that are about to go.

00:38:20 Claire

Absolutely.

00:38:23 Curtis

To Secondary school.

00:38:25 Curtis

And how can we make sure that works for everyone in the city, whether or not that's about the environment around housing or health?

00:38:32 Curtis

And then about jobs and and that kind of thing. And I just think

00:38:38 Curtis

You know, there has to be a better way of working on this stuff.

00:38:41 Claire

Absolutely. And you know, opening up that dialogue is really important and I think that's what we're trying to do in Bristol because you're right, you know, it's not just education, it's health, it's housing, it's transport, it's, you know.

00:38:57 Claire

Really your description of Brighton - just you could have been talking about Bristol. You know, there's plenty of people

00:39:05 Claire

Who, you know wear their values loudly.

00:39:09 Claire

Will will protest, will march.

00:39:13 Claire

But when it comes down to it, everyone's quite individualistic about their own child, and you know you can understand why it's it's it's their child, it's, you know, but how can we act more collectively?

00:39:27 Claire

And and I think that that view of Bristol and and Brighton probably

00:39:33 Claire

is what masks a lot of the inequalities in both cities you know? So Bristol, we have it particularly in terms of race. You know, you speak to a lot of people in Bristol and about Bristol when they talk about how it's it's a really vibrant multicultural

00:39:51 Claire

inclusive mixed City, when in reality the Black and brown people in the city have really poor health outcomes,

00:40:00 Claire

educational outcomes. You know, there's there's data to to back that up and whilst there's loads of great initiatives in the city around race and race equality.

00:40:11 Claire

The inequality is really, really stark, and that's not talked about much. You know, it's the class inequality is talked about a lot more. I think people feel more comfortable talking about that than with race.

00:40:26 Claire

But opening up some of these these questions and when we think about systems change, I think you're right that you know, we're asking the people who are about to go through it, but it's almost too late

00:40:41 Claire

For those families, you know it's it's sort of years earlier that we need to be looking.

00:40:47 Claire

Because system change takes a really, really long time.

00:40:51 Claire

I guess moving away from that consultation because you know, I acknowledge it's it's an open consultation, it's you know it it's a really sensitive issue.

00:41:03 Claire

I imagine by the time this podcast gets

00:41:07 Claire

Gets published we'll know some of the the outcome of that consultation, so moving away from that, what are some of the other challenges that you've encountered?

00:41:17 Curtis

I mean I think that I mentioned the sort of marketised school system and one of the things that I would love to change

00:41:27 Curtis

Is you know moving away from schools

00:41:32 Curtis

Solely sort of basing what they're doing on their grades, their place in league tables, because I think you know, there's been quite a lot of research that's come out recently. I think some of it might even come out from Bristol about the way schools are measured.

00:41:49 Curtis

And the way attainment is measured and and how if you take socioeconomic stuff into account.

00:41:55 Curtis

You know, actually things look quite different in schools. There's been quite a lot of debate about Ofsted and and how it works and obviously the one-word rulings have been scrapped and there's there's a sort of work going on at the moment about how.

00:42:06 Claire

Yeah.

00:42:10 Curtis

They should be measuring schools, but I do think you know it. It does a lot of damage to the way that schools operate.

00:42:18 Curtis

Certainly

00:42:20 Curtis

I I feel like, you know, in Brighton

00:42:23 Curtis

The schools are meant to work together, right? They're meant to be working in support of each other. This idea that you have a, you know, there's this phrase that's been brought up recently in Brighton, and I think it's been sort of coined by the City Council about the 'city child' focusing on the city child

00:42:39 Curtis

As this sort of thing that we should all be

00:42:42 Curtis

Thinking about and yet I don't know if you can do that with the school system that we have. You know, it's a lovely idea, but I'm just not sure if it's possible. So that requires national policy change, right? That's basically that's basically.

00:42:56 Curtis

Umm.

00:42:57 Curtis

Changing those things that you know, I mean, there's some other stuff that's been mentioned recently in the in the work that the the government are doing around giving

00:43:07 Curtis

Powers back to councils on admissions at academy schools because Brighton's really lucky that it only has a couple of academies in as secondary schools and the the local authority have always been against academisation of schools.

00:43:24 Curtis

So it means that they have

00:43:26 Curtis

More power, I think over their schools than a lot of councils do.

00:43:31 Curtis

And so again, that's another challenge I think that

00:43:35 Curtis

You know, needs national policy change.

00:43:38 Claire

Yeah. And that's certainly one of the biggest differences between Brighton and Bristol where you know, the the city, certainly for secondary education is almost completely academised. And there are historical reasons for that.

00:43:54 Claire

And the local authority having influence over schools is is very difficult.

00:43:59 Claire

In Bristol, academies set their own admissions criteria and that has had a huge impact in the city. But yeah, it's interesting to hear that you think it's about bigger systems change, I think.

00:44:14 Claire

One of the things I'm wondering is I wonder whether have has it come up

00:44:21 Claire

From parents or from anyone in the city that that actually the approach of changing catchments and changing admissions

00:44:29 Claire

Is not the right way to go, and actually we should be looking at every child going to their local school

00:44:36 Claire

And making sure that those schools are all of you know, a similar a similar quality providing a similar education. And I do think you sort of touched on the reasons why that's not the case

00:44:49 Claire

With thinking about attracting teachers and start times etc, but has that come up at all as a challenge?

00:44:56 Curtis

Yeah, I mean, again in this current consultation and in other times, you know, I mean one of the big sort of

00:45:05 Curtis

Alternative ideas that is being pushed is 'why don't we just make all schools good?' Because then maybe parents won't care about choice.

00:45:14 Curtis

And you see it in in Scandinavian countries like Finland, for example.

00:45:19 Curtis

Where you know they are, you know, kids just go to their local school and in an ideal world, I think that is the best option.

00:45:29 Curtis

But we don't have that situation at the moment in this country. I think, you know, the council and the government would say we're trying to make all schools really good, right? That's a that's an ongoing job.

00:45:44 Curtis

I yeah. I mean, as far as I'm concerned, I feel like I think there's like short term stuff that I feel should be happening now, which is the stuff that I think we're pushing for in Brighton, this desegregation and and because I think it, you know, that plays out, plays out in the schools itself itself, you know like one one example I mentioned in one of the podcast episodes recently is.

00:46:05 Curtis

You know, you have,

00:46:07 Curtis

There's a this is primary school thing, but I think it carries over to secondary schools. You have a situation where you have one primary school where the PTA raises hundreds of pounds per pupil per year, which gets put into the pot and is used for all sorts of things. Additional things.

00:46:23 Curtis

And then you have another school where it's got really high numbers of free school meal pupils where they don't even have a PTA. They don't raise any money.

00:46:28 Claire

Mm.

00:46:31 Curtis

And one headteacher said to me in one of the secondary schools, she said that, you know, for her, she is using any surplus money and they don't really have surplus money, but any money they have to pay to make sure kids have uniforms if their parents can't afford them.

00:46:49 Curtis

To sometimes pay for taxis for their kids to get to school, to do all that stuff, that when you've got high numbers of free school meal, kids go into your school, you've got to do that extra stuff. And because of the way schools are funded, obviously I know there's people premium and and

00:47:04 Curtis

But it still won't get over the fact that if you've got a school full of kids with a lot more advantage,

00:47:11 Curtis

The benefits that brings to a school, whether or not that's the capital from parents and their experience and their ability to support the school, all of that stuff.

00:47:21 Curtis

Is stuff that a school in a more in an area where there's less affluence and less advantage just doesn't have. So again, you know, yes, all schools should be supported to become really good and outstanding or whatever the description is.

00:47:36 Curtis

But part of the picture of making that happen is, I think by having a better social mix of kids in school.

00:47:42 Claire

Thank you. Yeah. That's that's really really well explained. I think you've touched on really important points there.

00:47:48 Claire

Let's move on to our final question, which is the same for all guests on our podcast.

00:47:56 Claire

What would a just education system look like to you?

00:47:59 Curtis

I mean, you know, this is something I've talked about a bit. To me, it feels like we have a school system, right that creates a situation where there's a sense that you get it over and done with.

00:48:12 Curtis

That education is something you do, and then you leave that behind and you go into the world and you do work. You, you know, you get on with your life. I despise that. I I I think that a just education system is not just one that is

00:48:31 Curtis

You know, that the barriers are well understood for children from all sorts of different backgrounds, and the system supports that. It doesn't just look at kids and think by the time they reach the school gate, everyone's equal, which sometimes it feels like that is the case.

00:48:47 Curtis

But it is also one that instils this idea of lifelong learning.

00:48:54 Curtis

Of loving that in some way not turning it into a thing that you feel like you basically just need to get it over and done with so you can get on with your life. And I know not everyone feels like that about education, but from where I'm from and from a lot of the people I'm around and

00:49:12 Curtis

Went to school with. I think that's the sense that you end up with. So yeah, I'm not sure if that's exactly what you wanted to hear, but.

00:49:20 Claire

I think that's wonderful.

00:49:22 Claire

And you know, I, I love that idea of not keeping up this pretence that everyone's equal. I think that's, you know, that that's absolutely prevalent in education.

00:49:34 Claire

And hopefully by by telling these stories in the way you're doing in Brighton and the way we're doing in Bristol, we can start to break down that preconception and and start to

00:49:46 Claire

Talk about some of these things which make people love learning, as you've said. So yeah, this has been a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much.

00:49:58 Claire



And hopefully people will go from this podcast and and check out the Class Divide podcast where it sounds like there's an absolute wealth of information about Brighton, but probably thinking around the school system more generally. So thank you so much.

00:50:13 Curtis

Thank you for having me.

00:50:15 Claire

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