

What makes a just primary education in Bristol schools?

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Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

This podcast is about reimagining education. I am doctor Claire Stuart Hall, a researcher and educator with over 20 years in the field. Each episode I will guide you through our conversations concerning reparative futures.

00:00:17 Speaker 1

In each episode, we'll talk to educators and thinkers about how to create reparative justice in schools.

00:00:25 Speaker 1

This podcast forms part of the Repair Ed Project A5 year project, funded by UK PRI to examine education and equities in Bristol's primary schools.

00:00:36 Speaker 1

I'm joined in this episode by Claire Neeves and Fatima. Mohammed Ali. Welcome Claire. Do you want to introduce yourself?

00:00:44 Speaker 2

Hi yeah, I'm a former teacher senko and school leader. I've worked in Bristol for around 15.

00:00:51 Speaker 2

Ten years across the sector and I've seen how the injustices play out in South and E Bristol especially, and I'm now an engagement fellow on the repaired project, which I came to through the SW Anti Racist Education Forum.

00:01:07 Speaker 1

Wonderful. Welcome. Thanks so much for joining me today and.

00:01:11 Speaker 1

My dear friend, Fatima, did you want to introduce?

00:01:13 Speaker 3

Yourself. Yes. Thank you, Claire. I'm also a teacher by trade. I've taught in Bristol schools for about 10 years, across different wards.

00:01:22 Speaker 3

I'm an educator and now lecturer in higher education, and I was also educated in Bristol. Like Claire, I'm also an engagement fellow with the repaired project and I came through that to that through my work in.

00:01:36 Speaker 1

Schools. Wonderful. Thank you both so much for joining me. I really appreciate it because I know that you've given a lot to Bristol.

00:01:43 Speaker 1

As educators and and I'm really keen to to hear and to just have a conversation really about just educational futures and about the types of injustice that we see in Bristol schools and how we can begin to.

00:01:58 Speaker 1

Reimagine it differently. So I'm going to start by just asking what makes a just education system, in your view?

00:02:06 Speaker 2

I think 1 where there's fairness, but when we talk about fairness, we're talking about equity rather than equality. So recognising the differences that exist, creating opportunity for everyone.

00:02:18

Hmm.

00:02:20 Speaker 1

And how do you imagine that in schools?

00:02:22 Speaker 1

That that, you know, if we if we spoke to schools and we rang up head teachers, they'd be saying that they're doing that.

00:02:28 Speaker 1

And yet the outcomes, you know, the outcomes for, you know, children who are excluded in higher numbers, who are racially minoritized children and children with SND, and also along that intersection, or children who have access to free school, school meals or a disadvantage even in terms of of outcomes.

00:02:29

Words.

00:02:48 Speaker 1

We can see that there are disparities in in outcomes. How do we get underneath it? Do you think? How do you how do you create fairness in the?

00:02:58 Speaker 1

System.

00:03:00 Speaker 3

I think we need to leave our systems beyond the education system. I agree with Claire, Echo this idea of fairness in order to sort of eradicate child poverty, high levels of exclusions. I think we need to improve outcomes for all children.

00:03:14 Speaker 3

But in order to do that, we need to.

00:03:17 Speaker 3

Look.

00:03:17 Speaker 3

At systems beyond the education system, so health, housing, etcetera. How do these all interlock to?

00:03:20

Hmm.

00:03:27 Speaker 1

Amplify inequality. Can you give me an example from your own practice? Do you think the where where schools can make the difference and create just futures with all of those kind of competing challenges?

00:03:29

Hmm.

00:03:46 Speaker 2

Yeah, it's it's really tricky because as Fatima said, everything is interlocking. You know, if you're, if you're a family living in poverty, getting to school in the morning can be a challenge. We we've, we've both, we've all taught children who come to school hungry in the.

00:04:03 Speaker 2

Morning, when we think about some of the children we've taught over the years who've had the biggest struggles engaging there's, there's always something underlying that, whether it be poverty or send, as you said. And that's without layering on all of the injustice around.

00:04:23 Speaker 2

Race that exists in the city and I think.

00:04:28 Speaker 2

Teachers are trying to solve things in their own small ways, so we've got though that micro resistance, you know, feeding a hungry child, for example. But as Fatima said, it's it's about those systems. If we if we can solve some of the injustice going on in the city in a wider way, then we can.

00:04:48 Speaker 2

Prepare for a just future of education. We can have all children getting their basic entitlement. You know something really simple would be free school meals for every child in Bristol, for example, that would go a long way.

00:05:02 Speaker 2

To solving some of that inequity around food poverty.

00:05:07 Speaker 1

And did you see that getting in the?

00:05:08 Speaker 1

Way.

00:05:09 Speaker 1

As a practitioner, I mean you've both worked in Britain. I'd be really keen to hear about your experiences of schooling injustices in Bristol that you saw. You know, what's the problem? We're trying to trying to solve or think about here.

00:05:11 Speaker 2

Yeah, absolutely.

00:05:21 Speaker 1

What was your experience of?

00:05:22 Speaker 3

It yeah, absolutely. I think we've both seen first hand poverty and child child poverty being really rife and I think this is the story sort of up and down the country. But in Bristol, I think it's having had a massive effect on schools across the city and communities across the city.

00:05:40 Speaker 3

Schools having food banks it's now, it's now quite common, but I remember teaching in a school in Bristol 10 years ago and and they're being a food bank and and they're also being children who were from families who had no recourse to public funds. So this is tied again to the wider systems that we're talking about. We're talking about immigration laws and systems.

00:06:01 Speaker 3

That meant that these families were locked out of the welfare state and they were locked out of that support.

00:06:06 Speaker 3

And and it and it just further exacerbated the the poverty that they were experiencing. So I've seen in the decade that I've taught in Bristol schools a lot of poverty, a lot of childhood poverty and experience that as a teacher first hand and and like Claire was saying about resisting those sort of the micro resistance that is happening in schools.

00:06:26 Speaker 3

Our communities are coming together to create, you know, food banks.

00:06:29 Speaker 3

Cities are helicoptering into schools to provide breakfast clubs, things like that. Teachers are, for example, I remember making being an RQT very early on in my career and making sandwiches at lunchtime with some of the leftover bread from the charity donations for the Food bank.

00:06:44 Speaker 1

Hmm, I recently qualified teacher.

00:06:45 Speaker 3

Yes, I recently qualified teacher and it's my second year of teaching, and I remember making these sandwiches for children whose families had no recourse public funds, so they didn't have access to free school meals. So that that is a very anecdotal example, but I think it speaks to.

00:07:00 Speaker 3

The wider systems, if you scratch sort of at the surface and start to get underneath the why it speaks to the sort of the bigger levers that play there.

00:07:08 Speaker 2

Hmm.

00:07:09 Speaker 1

And that that's a really good example, I think, certainly in my own experience in school of of leading in schools, that child was in front of, you know, that child in front of you.

00:07:21 Speaker 1

So you know, if there was a member of staff who didn't have their lunch, you know, you would do as a human, you would do everything you can to say ohh, that's it. You know, that's OK. So you're in this strange position. I think in schools where you're kind of enacting policies, but also you see families and, you know, I spent. I spent more time with my.

00:07:41 Speaker 1

You know, year seven class or my year 11 English class than I did.

00:07:45 Speaker 1

With my family, some days, you know, because the vast majority of the time I was in, I was in there, I had English every single day with them. So you, you're very, very, very close, I

think, to to to those challenges. And I think as a human being, I I would. I I wonder the extent to which schools.

00:08:05 Speaker 1

Are we know that schools are buying stationary? We know that they're bringing in lunches. We know that that communities come to school as a, as a resource, as a, as a safe space.

00:08:19 Speaker 1

So, but, and they're a challenge, you know, that's that's problematic in lots of ways. It creates a power differential, but I think there's a there's a human humane element to the profession to what we're doing and why we're doing it and why we show up every day. That's quite divorced when we're talking about policies or even when we're talking about statistics that I've.

00:08:40 Speaker 1

You know that? I've just that I've just said there's something separating that actually, I didn't feel as a practitioner. I don't feel when I'm around children because I think actually we've got, we've got resources. Let's use it in order to to support the children that we've got.

00:08:56 Speaker 2

Absolutely. And I think we.

00:08:58 Speaker 2

Speaking as someone who's worked in education for 15 years, I think when the coalition government came into power, things started to get worse and they've just got steadily worse since, so there are more children coming to school, hungry and and.

00:09:16 Speaker 2

From my own experience, I've just I've seen more and more families needing help and you talk about.

00:09:23 Speaker 2

Teachers buying stationery for children and you know, we all know those stories of primary school teachers especially, you know, spending huge amounts of their own money. But I think austerities got to the point now where teachers can't afford to do that anymore. When you know, we're now talking about teachers struggling to pay their living expenses.

00:09:43 Speaker 2

And so, and I think schools have come to rely on the goodwill of those in the profession to solve some of those problems, because, as you say, it's it's on a human level. How can you look at a hungry child and not say it's fine? Here's here's some.

00:10:01 Speaker 2

But that can only go so far, I think, in solving the issues and communities have have come to depend on the schools in ways that they haven't before, and I think COVID is really exacerbated that because we were the only place that was open. We were the only place where people could come.

00:10:21 Speaker 2

To get that that support and.

00:10:24 Speaker 2

And to to offer.

00:10:26

That.

00:10:27 Speaker 2

That community during that time and and I think you know, it's right that schools are communities. But I think if we're we're going to talk a bit more about Bristol particularly and the geographies of Bristol and some of that I think is where schooling starts to become even more unequal.

00:10:47 Speaker 1

And I think that.

00:10:47 Speaker 1

But you know, there's there's a real problem, isn't there? In schools, you know, I think I describe it in one of the podcasts of schools being the 4th Emergency Service. And I think that sounds.

00:10:59 Speaker 1

I don't know. Quite gratifying. I think if you're in education, but I think it's highly problematic, isn't it? Because I shouldn't as as a as a poor child. I shouldn't have to rely on the goodwill of a teacher. I should be avoided my rights. It's an injustice, isn't it, that that I

might be that I might have to, you know, cause that comes with a lot of conditions, right? That might come with some some conditions.

00:11:21 Speaker 1

Of I'm expected to attend or I'm expected to attend when I'm not well or my my parents might need to behave. You know that awful feeling that you have, you know, when somebody's.

00:11:30 Speaker 1

Got something on you. You know, it's such a it's you know that that that it to me is an injustice that actually people should be able to go to school as a, as a right. You know, as is the law and have food and breakfast and be able to access learning and and I'm thinking of the.

00:11:50 Speaker 1

The racialised nature of that we've got a majority ised white workforce in Bristol. That's mostly white women and lots of because of the divisions which I want to come and come on to talk about Bristol's geographies. It's highly problematic, isn't it, where we've got, you know, we might have white women who are rescue.

00:12:07 Speaker 1

Even poor black and brown children, or or perceived to be doing that so.

00:12:12 Speaker 1

There, there.

00:12:13 Speaker 1

Quite problematic. I think some of the some of the the food injustice and what that leads to in terms of the way that children are constructed. I don't know if you have thoughts on that.

00:12:24 Speaker 3

Fatima. Yeah, I absolutely agree wholeheartedly. I think it is a grave injustice to have to rely on your teacher making you sandwiches at lunchtime. That.

00:12:31 Speaker 3

Child should have had access to food and and breakfast and clothing and everything else that they needed to be happy and healthy. And I think it is a grave injustice and and a massive failure.

00:12:34 Speaker 3

2.

00:12:45 Speaker 3

Of systems that that was the case and and to kind of speak to sort of the the, the place based injustices in Bristol, I think it's really important for us to sort of think about the different wards of Bristol and how how this plays out in different parts of Bristol because this isn't the story across Bristol it's concentrated and really.

00:13:04 Speaker 3

Of specific pockets of the city.

00:13:08 Speaker 3

And and there are real concentrations of poverty, but there are also real concentrations of.

00:13:12 Speaker 3

And I just wonder how that creates a very specific dynamic in the city.

00:13:18 Speaker 1

And you've taught in different wards in the city. Yeah. And you said you were educated in the city. So you come with.

00:13:27 Speaker 1

A specific perspective I'm guessing and a really well-rounded perspective. And as you say, Bristol features great wealth, you know it's got the highest school places. I think outside London for independent schools and many of those independent schools are in the city, which skews the intake.

00:13:47 Speaker 1

I'd really love to hear your perspectives.

00:13:50 Speaker 1

About how schools are organised in Bristol and your and Bristol's geographies, and how they impact on children's experiences of schooling.

00:13:59 Speaker 2

I think when you think of Bristol, there's that really romanticised notion thinking about the different coloured terraced houses and the harbour and the Clifton suspension bridge. And

I always think you know some of the wards are so different from that image and so far removed and children from some of those wards wouldn't even recognize those romanticized.

00:14:20 Speaker 2

Views as being their city and and there's been a lot said about an almost sort of two tier educational system in Bristol.

00:14:31 Speaker 2

Because you've got.

00:14:33 Speaker 2

A high concentration of independent schools, but you've also got ex independent schools, which are now academies. You've got such heavy academisation in Bristol, especially compared to other places in in the country and and you know more than one person who's come into Bristol from outside has commented that it is such an.

00:14:53 Speaker 2

Unequal city compared to other cities, which are more racially diverse or and the, you know, have the similar demographics as Bristol. It just seems very.

00:15:04 Speaker 2

We're very separated. We've got, we've got diversity in Bristol, but I'd question whether we really have inclusion and that is always laid.

00:15:14 Speaker 2

At the fault of those communities for failing to integrate, and we're not looking at the people in power and the people with the wealth and asking why isn't that wealth shared?

00:15:25 Speaker 2

Why isn't? Why aren't things made fairer? It's always the people who are struggling to access who are blamed for not integrating. And that's a real issue.

00:15:35 Speaker 3

And I agree. Claire. How, how, how, the the role of systems and procedures and policies historically has kind of obfuscated why Bristol is such a segregated city?

00:15:45 Speaker 3

Today and why the wards are so distinctly?

00:15:49 Speaker 3

Sort of racially segregated.

00:15:52 Speaker 1

Can you say a bit about that for people who, let's say, somebody's tuning in from, you know, across the world, can you say a little bit about what, how you recognise the segregations in?

00:16:00 Speaker 3

Bristol well, yes. Historically I think post war Saint Paul's for example as a as an area and as a neighbourhood was a very bombed out.

00:16:09 Speaker 3

Area, Post War and so Caribbean communities came and settled because they they were the parts of Bristol as the city that rents were affordable for those communities and they were also the parts of the city where people were willing to rent in those communities.

00:16:24 Speaker 3

And so as time has gone on and we've had migration from different parts of the world to Bristol as a city, we've had different communities come in.

00:16:34 Speaker 3

Settle in Bristol and and and sort of either be settled by the local authority in in areas like same pools because of social housing or choosing to settle in those areas because they are pre-existing communities that they identified with. And so I think that's over time one of the.

00:16:49 Speaker 3

Reasons why we've got pockets and areas of Bristol that are very monoethnic or have historically been and the systems are levers there at play. You know when we're talking about social integration, you're right, communities I think get blamed for not integrating or assimilating to Bristol as a city, but there were systems at play.

00:17:10 Speaker 3

Like social housing, that meant that they were moved into those areas and yeah.

00:17:15 Speaker 1

And and also part of the part of the policy. I think in you know from my own research.

00:17:20 Speaker 1

The dispersion and dispersal policy that came into force in the in the 60s in Bristol meant that children were bussed from areas like Saint Paul's to Henbury yeah, because each no school could have over 30% of children from ethnic minority backgrounds.

00:17:40 Speaker 1

And to kind of.

00:17:40 Speaker 1

Curb white flight so so there were.

00:17:44 Speaker 1

That it it's very it's very interesting and complex, but what what's the lasting legacy now, do you think of that on in in Bristol? So what and how does that play out in schools?

00:17:53 Speaker 1

Do you think in the?

00:17:54 Speaker 3

Lasting legacy. Now it's interesting because there's lots of other things that player think. Still you're right. It's very, very complicated and a complex thing. Gentrification now plays into it and different wards and different areas in Bristol are ever.

00:18:06 Speaker 3

Changing still it's not a static thing and it and things are. Things are changing and moving all the time, but I think the lasting legacy of that is that you've got a history of segregated education system that you said, Claire, that's very, very segregated and you've got different.

00:18:23 Speaker 3

Experiences of of, of education for different children across the city of Bristol. We've also got really high levels of academisation over time, some of the highest levels of academisation. I think in the country in Bristol as a city. And so I think those Academy trusts are also operating in silos across the city.

00:18:43 Speaker 3

So we've got pockets of education that look really different in different parts of the city.

00:18:47 Speaker 3

Hey.

00:18:48 Speaker 1

Claire, did you want?

00:18:49 Speaker 2

To come in, I was going to mention the the white flight and the gentrification. I think it's, you know it it's something that was deliberate policy after the war moving certain communities out of certain areas, clearing people out into new housing and then.

00:19:09 Speaker 2

That's where people.

00:19:11 Speaker 2

Moving into the city could afford to live, as Fatima said, but that's sort of become this self fulfilling reinforcement carries on through gentrification. So you know, huge, huge parts of the population are moving into areas which are seen as desirable.

00:19:32 Speaker 2

Trendy and you know, as an area starts to change it then becomes the next place to go to and you can see that sort of getting further and further away from the city center as as time goes on.

00:19:46 Speaker 2

And you know, I think we're all complicit in that in many ways. You know, I have to examine that. I am someone who moved out of South Bristol to East Bristol because I couldn't afford to buy a house in South Bristol anymore, you know, so we're all. We're all complicit in the system in some way. And as educators, that's something that I think.

00:20:07 Speaker 2

We've got to tackle and I suppose that's what made me so attracted to becoming part of this project, because.

00:20:15 Speaker 2

I want to look at how we can improve things, what happens next.

00:20:20 Speaker 1

So let's move to that then. If we can spend a little bit of time reimagining because I think that's where the, you know, that's our seed of resistance, really, what would a just primary education in Bristol look like?

00:20:34 Speaker 3

I think it brings us full circle, doesn't at the beginning of the conversation for me, I think it would look like eradicating child poverty, eradicating school exclusions, improving outcomes for all children and ensuring that all children have sort of.

00:20:49 Speaker 3

Happy, healthy outcomes out of our education system.

00:20:56 Speaker 3

But again, it kind of leads me to thinking about systems beyond the education system and what would need to change in order to be able to change the education system. And so I guess widening out that picture, it would mean changing things beyond the education system. So it's not just the education system that's changing, it would be everything.

00:21:15 Speaker 1

Can I challenge you?

00:21:16 Speaker 1

Let's say all of that is done, umm as a. As an educator, cause I know that your heart is in curriculum.

00:21:24 Speaker 1

What would we change in schools?

00:21:26 Speaker 1

Do you think so? Let's say all of that was addressed. What would? What would we have to change it? Would we leave schools intact?

00:21:34 Speaker 1

Is that delivering is what we're delivering in the classroom, is that is what happens in schools every day, does that, would we continue to deliver the same thing or do you think that needs to change? I'm thinking epistemologically symbolically, you know what children have access to.

00:21:51 Speaker 3

No, I I I would, I would widen it out even more and I think.

00:21:54 Speaker 3

We would we would get rid of school.

00:21:56 Speaker 3

As they are, I know that sounds very radical, but schools, as they are sort of, are geared to produce workers for the economy and workers for.

00:21:59 Speaker 1

Now tell me.

00:22:07 Speaker 3

Capital system that we're in. And so if we're thinking about getting rid of the white supremacist heteropatriarchy and we're thinking about getting rid of those capitalist systems and and and then if there is no pressure to produce workers for that system, then what does an education look like? I think that's what a truly just education system looks like.

00:22:28 Speaker 3

And So what would education, for the sake of learning, look?

00:22:31 Speaker 3

Like.

00:22:32 Speaker 2

Yeah, that's that's exactly where I'd land as well. And you know, like we come back all the time to the idea of cultural capital and education, it's it's something that everyone, it's the thing that everyone says is going to make things fairer and it's going to make a just education system.

00:22:49 Speaker 2

But the thing that keeps coming up for me is whose cultural capital?

00:22:54 Speaker 2

You know, why are we saying that cultural capital is visiting those monuments in the centre of Bristol, being part of those institutions which have hoarded wealth?

00:23:07 Speaker 2

Why isn't the cultural capital?

00:23:09 Speaker 2

In the communities focused on in the same way, and I think perhaps that perhaps there maybe educators listening to this, especially school leaders who think well, that's really, really unfair. We do do that. Our curriculum is based on local knowledge. It is based on our school community.

00:23:24 Speaker 2

And it may be in a.

00:23:26 Speaker 2

In some tokenistic sense, in that you've got a unit of work where you look at something that happens in the community, but.

00:23:34 Speaker 2

Are you creating your curriculum with the community from a child centered and community centered point of view? You know what, like Fatima said, what would learning look like for learning sake? What is it that these kids want to know? You know, what's the where's the epistemological justice in?

00:23:52 Speaker 2

Creating your curriculum, you know, it should be Co constructed. It should be local curriculum.

00:24:01 Speaker 2

With the local community, local knowledge from local leaders, I think that's that's where I'd land and.

00:24:09 Speaker 2

Like Fatima said, just.

00:24:11 Speaker 2

We need to stop if we're. If we're creating workers, then we're always playing into the hands of the leaders and I think as teachers we've got really, really strong.

00:24:25 Speaker 2

History of political opposition and not just believing I don't think there are many teachers out there who believe that we need to create good little worker bees for capitalism, but we do all. We are all complicit in these systems. So I think a just education system would really look like liberation from all of those systems.

00:24:42 Speaker 3

Absolutely. I I would agree.

00:24:45 Speaker 3

I think truly justification system would not be working to reform. We'd be looking at. We'd be talking about abolition, abolition of the education system as we know it, not reforming the parts of it within the system that we're currently working in. And I think to try and use sort of.

00:25:03 Speaker 3

Palestine as a really timely analogy, you know, at the moment we're asking for a ceasefire because that's very, very, very necessary. The bigger picture is asking for liberation. And so we won't stop, stop short of liberation because the ceasefire is not enough. We cannot just accept the crumbs. We need to be able to.

00:25:22 Speaker 3

Go beyond reforming and abolish the system as it stands.

00:25:27 Speaker 1

That sounds like a brilliant place to wrap up. Thank you so much for joining me on our podcast.