

Notes from the Unconscious Bias Parent Forum via zoom

Monday 22nd March

In attendance:

34 parents and staff including Carolyn Osborne, Jeanette Brumby, Hania Ryans and Emily Bruggy.

Hania Ryans opened the meeting and took the notes. These are not word for word minutes:

Good evening and welcome to everyone. Tonight, is an opportunity to listen to a talk about unconscious bias. A subject that was mentioned in our first forum about diversity and becoming an anti-racist school.

It is my privilege to welcome Carolyn Osbourne. We are very lucky to have Carolyn here tonight and are very thankful that she has agreed to speak to us about her experiences. Carolyn is a specialist Education Law lawyer with extensive experience of handling education cases on behalf of children and families. Carolyn challenges Local Authorities to ensure all children have access to education.

Carolyn has previously been a Senior Lawyer at an innovative young people's legal practice, Streetwise Community Law Centre where she took on several ground-breaking cases and received a Highly Commended Law Society Excellence Award in 2012 for her work in the field of Education Law. Prior to this Carolyn spent 10 years specialising in Child Care and Criminal Defence work and worked as a Court and Police Station Duty Solicitor and freelance Advocate. She has spent most of her professional life supporting vulnerable families and children.

We look forward to hearing from Carolyn tonight. Please do put any questions you might have for Carolyn in the chat. I will be taking notes and Mrs Bruggy will be monitoring the chat. Now I will pass you over to Carolyn.

CO: I am going to be speaking from experiences of being a mother and will share some personal experiences as well as professional. I am delighted to speak tonight as I live close to Fairlawn. We will be looking at what is unconscious bias what it means, impact of teachers' bias from personal and professional point of view.

- **Unconscious bias** (or implicit **bias**) is often **defined** as **prejudice** or unsupported judgments in favour of or against one thing, person, or group as compared to another, in a way that is usually considered unfair.
- **Unconscious biases** are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. Everyone holds **unconscious** beliefs about various social and identity groups.

I have delivered this training to lawyers, they didn't always get it, as we all make assumptions about each other. On the course there was a participant who had a Scouse accent who was casually dressed and there were assumptions she was lower down in the practice, in fact she was a Senior Partner in a law firm. The take away was that we all pass judgements on each other.

Institutional Racism: The Facts

- Black Caribbean boys are 3 times more likely to be excluded than their white counterparts.
- They are 168 times more likely to be excluded if they also have SEN and FSM. (TES 21 December 2017)
- Black Caribbean pupils consistently achieve lower marks when assessed internally. (Published by Schools' Research and Statistics Unit Lambeth Education and Learning March 2017)

CO: Teachers unconscious bias. The following accounts are true and permission has been granted for them to be quoted

Case 1:

My daughter was a straight A student at GCSEs. All her life she has wanted to be a dentist, she needed 3 A's predicted at A Level to be able to do dental surgery. At AS levels she got 2 A's and 1 C (1 mark off a B). At a parents' evening her Chemistry teacher would not predict an A which meant she would not be offered any interviews for University. The reason given was my child is not academic but she had already got As. She had also already been asked about applying for Oxford but she was not interested in attending. I asked the teacher what was it about my child's academic profile, the teacher became very emotional and said are you challenging my professional opinion. She said you can prove me wrong but I am not predicting her an A. My daughter did go on to get an A but was unable to apply for university with the predicted grades. She had to take a year out and then applied the following year with her actual grades. She is now successfully completing her chosen degree. Unconscious bias, the teacher just saw a child who would not get an A but could not articulate why not and only race seemed the reason. My daughter complained to the school supported by the Mum through the correct channels and she was moved sets to another chemistry teacher. The teacher would say she was not racist but by undermining school grades she was effectively barring my child from her career path.

Case 2:

Management of pupils, exclusions of 3 pupils.

A robbery at school involving three boys who had got hold of a fob key. One went into the staffroom and rummaged through bags and stole phones and money, the other two were look outs. Only one child was permanently excluded and that was the child at the bottom of the stairs on lookout. He was permanently excluded as he did not appear sorry enough. He was Nigerian and did not make eye contact when explaining his role in the incident. He has been taught to bow his head and not get eye contact when being reprimanded as part of his culture. The other 2 boys were white and they did not get permanently excluded. The unconscious bias is that black children are uncontrollable and criminal, he was perceived to have not shown remorse. He was reinstated into mainstream school.

Case 3:

Before starting the work that I currently do I was a Chair of Governors at a local school. We needed to update our prospectus so I was collecting examples from local schools. I popped into Fairlawn and asked for a handbook for new parents and I was told that it was very hard to get into the school and that I could not have one because they were really just handbooks for families who already had a

place. As I walked away I felt my treatment had been a bit odd. I spoke to my Vice Chair who was white for advice and she went to Fairlawn and asked for a prospectus. She was given one as well as being offered a tour of the school. So, I made a complaint to Fairlawn and the receptionist said I had been rude and aggressive so she did not want to reach up and get a prospectus. It went to governors and I received an apology but it was more about how the receptionist felt rather than her behaviour towards me. The senior leaders closed ranks and accepted the story that the staff member had been busy and stressed about dealing with a rude aggressive black woman. This demonstrates how unconscious bias works as they were prepared to accept that I was rude and aggressive. As a Governor myself I was not pleased with the outcome. This did happen 17 years ago. But it is a taint of character being labelled a black angry woman, now I would go to the County Court.

JB: It comes down to the culture of school, challenging whether we are open comes back to unconscious bias. It was clear cut what happened on that day. My colleagues labelled you as an angry black woman, you had every right to be angry.

CO: Sometimes I get angry and yes, I am black. I am entitled to be angry. Needless to say I was not angry on that occasion but no one asked the Receptionist what did she do to make me angry? The notion of me being angry was not scrutinized just immediately accepted as a valid reason for her failing to give me the prospectus.

Q: How can teachers learn to make better exam decisions?

CO: Challenging outcomes. A black child would rather have an exam than have a teacher assessment from someone that has known them. There are multiple studies that shown that Black children achieve better marks when externally assessed. Showing that Teachers perceptions actually impact on black children's outcomes

Another example was when my son had an hour's detention in his first week at secondary school for not completing his first piece of home work which he had incorrectly entered in the wrong day of his handbook. As a 1-hour detention stands as a Head of department detention I asked whether the punishment was reasonable and proportionate? I sent a letter into the school with my son to hand over to the teacher. The teacher phoned me during his detention, she was very upset and angry and accused me of being unsupportive. I made it clear that I was fully supportive of the school and had instructed my son to attend the detention but intended to take the matter up with the head of the department to determine whether the detention was reasonable and proportionate punishment. I stressed that my son was instructed to attend the detention she confirmed he was with her and I also stressed that he would stay with her until she determined he could leave. The teacher remained angry and accused me of being unsupportive after around 10/15 minutes of screaming from the teacher I again said you have my child and he will remain with you and then it will come down to whether this punishment is this reasonable? After ending the call, the teacher sent him home.

The teacher then asked for a meeting to deal with my complaint, sadly I was unable to attend but Dad attended where she explained that the detention had been given because she wanted to send a message to all the black boys in her class. The teacher left the school permanently within the term and the complaint ended with her departure (I don't believe her leaving was linked to the complaint).

This approach has been in existence since the 60's – why does it remain? Because conversations are not happening, we suffer the impact of unconscious bias. Until it is owned and people wake up to assumptions it is unconscious bias and linked assumptions that leads to these decisions. The same

bias that had the careers teacher tell me to become a nurse rather than pursue a career that required a Degree. (this being back at a time when nurses didn't require degrees of course).

Q: How can we stop unconscious bias and micro aggression in the class?

EB: If we see a child has been affected by behaviours we need to change the story. I am now more aware of institutional racism and we need to continue to have more conversations like we are having tonight. We need continued staff training.

Parent 1: A lot has to do with conversations and training. It needs to go right back to the initial teacher training and continue all the way into school.

Parent 2: Thank you for sharing your experiences as a parent and we need to be having more conversations. The teachers need to be reflective and thank you for starting this conversation.

Parent 3: Are schools audited internally on the marking down of exams?

CO: The Stats are not audited, it has been challenged but there has been no change. Black children do better in tests rather than teacher assessments. White teachers need to reflect. As a black person I can tell you what it looks like from the other side. People need to reflect because saying I am not racist is not enough, but what are the reasons for you not being racist. There must be a reason why some of the cases I have spoken about tonight happened. We need to get to children before they are excluded. Why did that teacher feel threatened by the black boy? My niece is a younger teacher at a local secondary school. When there are behavior incidents with the older black boy's often her white male colleagues will seek out her for support feeling that the boys respond better to her as she is black. Some white staff are frightened of black students. Need to reflect on how you react as a teacher and why that happens.

Parent 4: You call it when you can, there is a fear of black parents but what is that impact on my child? More than once I have called it out but it is bigger than the school. Unconscious bias is a thing. Giving my child this knowledge and what they think of themselves is key.

CO: We are producing future leaders that hopefully can reflect on individual decision making and keep these conversations going.

EB: Ignoring anything said is part of the system. Thank you to those that have spoken tonight.

JB: Really sorry for your experiences at Fairlawn, I was not a leader here but I do apologise.

CO: I can share the impact of unconscious bias but cannot give the solution. We need to look at all situations as individuals, look at our internal conversations, what is driving our reactions that's where the bias lives. Bring challenge and scrutiny to get to what's really happening.

Thank you to everyone that attended.