

"WE NEED TO TAKE ACTION"

Saoirse Osborne speaks to Hurst's new director of Diversity & Inclusion.

2020

has been a strange mixture of both stillness and upheaval. When schools and businesses were closed, the clock seemed to stop; as it starts ticking again and somewhat normal life resumes, an opportunity has emerged for change. Hurst is making the most of that opportunity, with a new platform for Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) at Hurst. I spoke to Mrs Edwards-Clarke, Director of Diversity and Inclusion, to find out about what Hurst is doing.

Mrs E-C joined at the same time as me, in 2017, as a PE teacher. She became Housemistress of Fleur just a year later – with these time-consuming roles, I was surprised she was ready to take on D & I Director as well.

'I've always had an interest in what we can do to make our pupils even better, even more, inclusive as a cohort. When the Black Lives Matter movement kicked off [in spring of this year] it really resonated with me, and I thought, what on earth can we do?'

Mr Manly (the headmaster) brought up the problem of the 'Hurst bubble' (the lack of diversity at Hurst, making the school insular) in a Prize Day speech in 2019: should the school have acted sooner? She sighs. 'Good question-yes, it should have happened a long time ago, but I think now we've got more education on it; we've got more access to resources. Mr Manly was brilliant. He thought- right. We do need to think about our privilege at this school, so let's kick-start it.'

Mrs E-C doesn't want Hurst's diversity initiative to be a 'tokenistic, one-year project. We've got to think of generations and generations to come and I don't think it will ever finish.'

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That being said, any organisation needs tangible, achievable targets. The staff platform has already written 10 main aims, one being the expansion of curriculums so they explore a more diverse range of views, particularly in English and the humanities. 'We are a private school and have so much more



scope to change than any state school – they have to follow a structured, planned curriculum. The curriculum is so dated and that's something we're going to be really proud and keen to change at Hurst.'

Another aim is making the staff and pupil bodies more diverse. 'We've got amazing staff and pupils here but we are still a white, privileged, middle-class school. Everyone says it's the demographic, but I find that really hard to listen to.' Indeed, Hurst is just 7 miles from Brighton, known for its diverse demography.

It's easy for attempts to increase diversity to morph into virtue signalling or (well-meant) condescension. 'We need to do this properly, by taking expert advice.' What are Hurst's plans so far? 'We've got to go to different schools to look for pupils that need scholarships and bursaries; we need to look at our teachers and where they're coming from: Oxford, Cambridge, Durham... why don't we look Midlands way? Birmingham? Leicester?'

This aspect of change is one of the most difficult for pupils to get involved in. But Mrs E-C is hopeful. 'Get the pupil platform on staff interviews! Why can't you have a pupil interview platform – you are the ones



who are being taught-why shouldn't you have a choice in who your teachers are going to be?'

Mrs E-C has high hopes for the inclusion side of the initiative, too. Plans are being made for a post-Covid designated space at the college, a drop-in centre 'where people can come and talk about how we can change things and it's actually our space. It needs to be such an open-door policy.'

Until that's set up, how should pupils get involved in Hurst D & I? 'Simple. Email me; I'll add you to the team'. From there, pupils also have the chance to become House Ambassadors, representatives who attend D&I meetings on behalf of their house. 'It's absolutely crucial that every house in the school has spokespeople to stand up and collect thoughts, views and opinions and bring them to the platform.'

But diversity and inclusion shouldn't stop at the bounds of what Hurst D & I can do: what is done outside the meetings is just as important. 'Pupils need to be learning, asking questions, speaking out in chapel, calling out people and challenging them.' However, she concedes that aggressively challenging people on their views can risk alienating them. 'Some of the things [my parents] come up with still infuriate me, but I've got to challenge it in a really diplomatic way. You don't want to get angry; you've got to know your stuff.' So, the first step is educating yourself. 'Reading books is huge. But to say the best way to learn is to read a book sounds a bit preachy.' For the time-pressed or book-averse, there are plenty of alternatives. 'Go to lectures, sign up to webinars, go and see guest speakers.' Mrs E-C also acknowledges the role social media can play. 'Join Twitter. Twitter has changed so much about the way I think. You've got to be sensible with it, [Twitter

has been criticised for an algorithm which creates an echo chamber phenomenon, where users only see what they already agree with] but on Twitter you are connected and networking with so many diverse people.'

Mrs E-C is confident Hurst pupils are ready to educate themselves on change. In the assembly she gave on the first Monday of term, an ex-student, Bella, described how, after giving a talk on racism in Congo, she was essentially ignored: nobody contacted her; the school made no changes. That was just four years ago.

In contrast, after Mrs E-C's assembly, she received up to 40 emails from staff and pupils. The D & I platforms have also seen strong support: 'We've got over 60 pupils and 30-40 staff signed up already.' For her, 'the fact that governors and teachers are on board with this...that's hugely promising.'

That's not to say Hurst hasn't got a long, long way to go. 'We're now 13 years on from when I was in school, feeling different like I couldn't challenge things, that people didn't think like me...I feel pupils are still feeling the same way.

'But I honestly feel like we've got the right platform...we've got a good place here.'

I think – and hope – she is right.

Contact Mrs Edwards – Clarke with any questions or to sign up to D & I at tjami.edwards-clarke@hppc.co.uk. You can also apply to become a house ambassador by speaking to your HoM.