

OUR JOURNEY TOWARDS DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

BY JAMES CONLY

The world we live in today has never been so open. Through media and travel we can experience all the world has to offer and become fully immersed in living life and learning how others live their life. The question is, can you do this without preconceptions, judgemental attitudes, and a true sense of openness?

By sharing our journey at Doha College, I hope that other school leaders will be encouraged to take on diversity and inclusion within their community. We all know that every school should have a Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) policy, but how do you know it is actually working?

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

At a time when the world was alight with debates and rallies asking for equality for all, the school could not ignore that it was time for growth. Our students, in particular our sixth formers, were feeling empowered by world events and quite rightly asked the school what we are doing to protect their rights and the rights of their peers. We had a choice to make: either listen to what they had to say or suppress their enthusiasm. We chose the former and took the following five steps towards growth:



THE COMMUNITY WAS RECEPTIVE AND APPRECIATIVE THAT WE WANT TO EMBED CHANGE



1. Firstly, we arranged a meeting with all the sixth form students and the school leadership. This was an open session, and any student could ask any question they wanted regarding DEI. As the leadership, we remained open-minded and honest despite some uncomfortable questions and discussions about how decisions were made in the past, and how, as a British school, we would guarantee it was not going to be a “white male-dominated colonial society”. As uncomfortable as this may have been, it was vital we allowed all views and questions to be shared. The meeting lasted two hours.
2. A student cultural committee was set up at the request of the students for follow-up action and to give a continued voice to students. This was led by me as Head of Student Welfare with two school prefects. Students were invited to join, and we had a team of 15 sixth formers.
3. Staff had the same opportunity to share, and the topic of DEI was discussed as part of an open town hall forum where, again, questions were asked and notes for improvement were taken.
4. A staff cultural committee from all areas of the school was set up with 17 members.
5. Students, staff, and parents were surveyed to find out their feelings on DEI and what the school was doing well, what the school could do better, what the school should stop doing, and what the school should start doing.

TOP TIPS FOR MOBILISING CHANGE

- > Get to know your various communities' views and opinions of DEI at the school.
- > Create a clear action plan and set out the school vision.
- > Examine the curriculum/ calendar for learning opportunities.
- > Seek support/training from outside agencies and communities.
- > Be open, honest, and self-reflective.
- > Be prepared to hear that everything is not ok in your school.

ESSENTIAL REPRESENTATION

The aim of both committees was to create a vision for the school, set targets and assist leadership in the decision-making process moving forward. It was vital to listen to the voices of the students and staff, and share information.

The student committee was tasked with:

- > Creating an awareness of the importance of DEI among the students.
- > Setting up student workshops to discuss current DEI barriers for minority groups.
- > Planning the best way forward to create an inclusive culture within the school.

Within the staff committee, several teams were established to create action plans for:

- > School policies
- > Managing risks and complaints
- > Training, coaching, and mentoring
- > Recruitment, promotion, and retention
- > Teaching and curriculum
- > Language and school ethos (including behaviour)
- > Community links

WHAT WE DISCOVERED

An audit of the student and staff bodies showed that, overall, students and staff felt that the school was diverse and inclusive, but areas were highlighted that needed improvement. This included the ability for some minority groups to be themselves and, although institutional racism was not felt as prevalent, there was an underlying tone of jokes and misunderstandings, and a lack of awareness of the adverse impact of such actions. One-third of students surveyed said that racism was used in jokes and banter, especially in the older year groups. This is not acceptable and will be a priority to help students and staff understand that culture and ethnicity should be celebrated, and not used as a means to dominate, or as a source of banter which may be harmful and cause students to feel isolated and excluded.

Another key area highlighted was the school curriculum. Students and staff felt that there were more opportunities for the inclusion of texts and role models from different cultures, genders, and backgrounds representing the different protected characteristics.

FEEDING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

The decision was made to distribute all survey results to show openness and honesty in our

findings and exactly where we are as a school. The results were shared with staff through a dedicated staff meeting, and to students in a series of assemblies. A parents' afternoon was set up to discuss the outcomes and engage parents in their support of the work carried out by the cultural committee.

This was the first time DEI action was being openly discussed with the parents, students, and staff, and I have to be honest I was quite nervous doing these meetings, but as a school we felt it was important to put our heads above the parapet and become vulnerable as we wanted to role-model an ethos of trust and openness. At times, apologies were given for past events and an acknowledgement of "we can do more" but, overall, the community was receptive and appreciative of the fact that we were being open and honest and want to embed change.

WHAT NEXT?

As one parent put it, we have shown we can talk the talk, now it is time to walk the walk, and show that we mean what we say; that it's not just a tick-box exercise to make ourselves feel better.

Hopefully this time next year we will see real change in attitudes and ethos, and a curriculum being developed to role-model and create opportunities for learning around DEI.



THE AUTHOR

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