



Interview with Ruth Pickersgill, Assistant Principal, St Brendan's 6th Form College

You have recently returned to Bristol in your new role as Assistant Principal at St Brendan's. Can you remind us about your previous work in Bristol?

I was Equalities Officer for Bristol's Children and Young People department for several years, working within the school improvement branch, helping schools to meet the OFSTED requirements on Equality and Community Cohesion. My team and I also developed a range of initiatives aimed at raising Black and Minority Ethnic attainment, including conferences for parents and young people, establishing a supplementary schools directory, funding community initiatives like the BME awards, and developing Bristol's BME strategy and the Famous Black Bristolians project.

You left Bristol in 2008 to become Diversity Manager at Leicester College. How did your role develop there?

Leicester College has a huge number of students, over 28,000, from a very diverse range of cultures and faith backgrounds. There were more than 4,000 EAL students and 800 refugee/asylum seeking students, so there was a wealth of talent and diversity to build on. I was appointed as Diversity Manager, also managing student services, but the job just grew and grew! With the support of an amazing Principal and senior leadership team I also took on the management of the three college libraries, the mentoring service, the two on-site nurseries, the inter faith chaplaincy, student liaison team, and support for disabled students and inclusion and the counselling and mental health service..

What an enormous set of responsibilities!

The brilliant thing about it all was that with such a range of teams to work with, I was able to embed equality and diversity issues throughout the whole college. We ran enrichment activities every week with displays, events, conferences, visitors from a range of cultures and faiths, supported by a taught tutorial programme all themed to the equality and diversity agenda. These were reinforced by changing displays in the libraries, activities for the nursery children and linked inter faith and community cohesion activities run by the chaplaincy. It was really exciting to see equality and diversity celebrated so explicitly and consistently.

And it turned out that the impact of all your work in Leicester was recognised nationally.

Yes, well it was a complete surprise and I still honestly don't know who nominated me but I had a letter from the Prime Minister's office just before Christmas 2012 to say that I had been awarded an MBE for services to Equality and Diversity in Further Education.

Amazing! Congratulations.

It's a bit embarrassing and I haven't heard any more since then so I haven't actually received the award yet. I must follow it up and find out what happens next.

And now you're back in Bristol.

I always wanted to live in Bristol again. I have strong ties with Bristol in terms of family and friends. So when I saw the St Brendan's post advertised I had to give it a try as I like working with the post-16 age group and it has a good reputation– also, not having taught for many years, I felt that any post I apply for had to be about pastoral support. Opportunities for a job like that in Bristol are limited. My experience in Leicester gave me the confidence to apply for the Assistant Principal post, but I was still a bit surprised when I was actually offered the job.

How do you see your role at St Brendan's developing?

I was really interested in working in a faith based institution because I've recently finished an MA in Inter-Religious Relations. I like to face new challenges and I think that St Brendan's poses some interesting questions about how to effectively embed a Catholic ethos where the staff and student body which is mostly not Catholic. For example, I'm still exploring the interface between certain equalities issues such as LGBT or gender identity and how they interact with Catholic values. The college has previously won an Investors in Diversity award and has a history of voluntary and charity work so it seemed there was a lot of good work to build on. There is also a programme in place which all students must attend called Spiritual Journey – I can see opportunities there for really interesting discussions and developments. The college is becoming increasingly diverse demographically and also provides good support for students with additional needs. It is considering new developments such as becoming a College of Sanctuary, as part of Bristol's City of Sanctuary movement and piloting a transition project for disabled students. I would love to develop some of the initiatives that worked at Leicester College, but my role here is wider as Assistant Principal, and not only about only Equalities and Diversity.

And the best part of your job ?

Listening to the students and getting them involved in their learning experiences so that their enthusiasm and energy become the basis of the college's future curriculum and pastoral developments. Young people have so much to teach us – it's time to listen to them, not just tell them what they should do.