

Sandra Harrison – SEND education specialist

Sandra Harrison is the director of SANCARL Limited. She gives guidance and support on Special Educational Needs and Disability to schools and colleges. Sandra is currently working in an interim role with an educational establishment via Veredus. We asked her to give her thoughts on 2020, race and her experience as a black woman growing up on both sides of the Atlantic.

Could you tell us a little about your background?

I have been a qualified and experienced SEND leader since 1996, with vast teaching and senior Leadership Team experience, as well as Headship of specials schools since 2012. During that time, I have led on diversity and inclusion, behaviour, and managed multi-disciplinary staff teams. I have worked in diverse and challenging primary and secondary settings in Inner City London, as well as Greater London, supporting Governing Boards with their practices. I have a wealth of strategic experience in Special Educational Needs Disability (SEND) and Autism.

How has Covid-19 affected your work?

Personally, I adapted to the restrictions of Covid-19 by power walking 7 miles daily in the local park; this was great for my mental and physical wellbeing. During this period, I also learnt how to use Zoom and Teams (remembering to look into the camera), but I feel that nothing can take away the importance of one-to-one contact with people, which is challenging when it is virtual.

Covid-19 has been exceedingly difficult for everyone, especially individuals with SEND, parents, and families. I have worked very closely with families who are at breaking point because of the lack of support they are receiving.



What has being black meant to you?

I began my schooling in the borough of Ealing and later moved to America. I attended school in Brooklyn, New York and Boston, Massachusetts. I clearly remember the separation of racial groups within one of the schools. In the playground you would find Italian pupils in one group, Spanish in another, black American in one and so on. This was an eye-opener for me, coming from England where the schools were diverse and I was free to speak to anyone. However, as I was from England and they loved my British accent, all the pupils spoke to and welcomed me.

Education in the states is hugely different to England, and I found that I thrived in the lessons as they were set at my level. I was one of the highest achievers in my French class (French was my weakest subject in England)! The curriculum allowed me to become very aware of black history and the struggles and inequality of black people. I left America feeling empowered as a black person because of the knowledge I gained through books, lessons and television.

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I returned to England and attended a school in Wimbledon. Within that school I received unacceptable racism from the teachers and pupils. I was the only black female pupil in attendance, and there was one other mix-heritage male. I was called very hurtful names because I was black. The teacher would say “people like you.....”. My mother was very trusting of the educational system and did not believe what I was saying. I had to defend myself from the comments and ill-treatment from people in the school. Eventually, my mum moved me to a much more diverse school in Putney.

I have experienced racism all my life, but I have learnt how to deal with these situations using various strategies. It is incredibly sad that Black people are still experiencing the same treatment as our parents, grandparents/ancestors. My parents were part of the Windrush generation and came to England from Barbados. The stories they told me of the way they were treated in British society was appalling.

I have three siblings and am the only child to attend university, achieving a MSc Mathematics and Computing in Education. My first job was in a bank and the bank manager would openly say to staff “watch out for the coons, double-check their accounts”. Then he would say to me “that doesn’t include you, Sandra”. Some staff laughed and others felt extremely uncomfortable and apologised for his actions. I eventually reported him and was transferred to another branch.

Throughout my career in education, I had to fight ridiculously hard to be respected for my work. I was always told “you are not ready yet, but you are great working with the pupils who display inappropriate behaviours”. There was a plan for me set out by others, but this was never what I wanted and deserved. I was told I was aggressive when I stood my ground, but my white colleagues would be told they are “passionate”.

What does being black mean to you now?

I am beautiful, intelligent, strong, blessed, proud, and privileged to be black. I am happy with my hair, lips, and complexion (things I was teased about when I was growing up). I have a rich culture and history and am very grounded. Being black means being resilient and having a continuous awareness of racism.

What changes you would most like to see – in the workplace? in society?

I believe Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) is vital. It is time to start having those conversations about race and equality. There needs to be respect and acceptance of the skills and knowledge that different cultures bring to a society.

A small fraction of my wish list is:

- To see an increase in black and ethnic majority people in senior leadership roles. In 2018 92.9% of headteachers were white British.
- The media to refrain from portraying black people in a negative or stereotypical manner.
- Review the history curriculum to ensure all cultures are addressed and discussed.
- Embrace each other’s cultures and work to make the world a safer and non-judgemental place.
- Respect black lives and treat everyone fairly – black lives matter – this does not mean that the lives of those who are not black do not matter. It simply means that it is a movement against racism and for the promotion of equality. It is a fact that the lives of black people do not currently have the same value as others.

Who do you admire most?

I admire many people.

- God
- Myself
- My mother and father for instilling positive values in my life
- My husband and children
- Mr Hughes (Headteacher) who gave me a chance to start my teaching career
- Oprah Winfrey
- Friends and families who have experienced struggles but have made it through successfully

We would like to thank Sandra for her honesty and candour.