

Black history month talks

Hair Discrimination - The Ruby Williams Case

Sas Amoah, Kate Williams, Lenny Williams, Rehana Awan:

SAS AMOAH: We're very grateful to have both Kate and Lenny Williams with us. And so many of you would have read the article that we sent around that Kate and Lenny wrote for the race and ethnicity hub. Kate and Lenny's experience is one of the stories that inspired the film we made looking at her discrimination. So it's a privilege to have them here with us in person to talk to us about their experiences.

And so today, we're going to start with the viewing of the film and then follow up with a Q&A afterwards. I have a few questions lined up already, but there'll also be opportunity for everyone else to ask some questions afterwards. So feel free at any point to pop questions that spring to mind into the comment section in the chat section. And pop a "Q" beforehand so we know it's a question and then someone will keep an eye on those. And we can take a look at those when we get started.

But before that, we'll get started. We're going to watch the film. Brilliant. Thank you very much, everyone. So we really wanted to make a film that explored the nuances of racism and explicit racism. So we, after a bit of research, we realized that there were lots of cases that would seem to revolve around hair discrimination. And we thought that would be a really effective way to kind of get across the points we wanted to explore.

And one of the main stories that we had come across was the case of Lenny and Kate Williams and their daughter Ruby. So we made the film semi-inspired by what they had experienced. And then interestingly enough, a few months later, I think, Kate had managed to catch the film. And she had contacted Rehana and we started a conversation, which was really interesting and really beneficial.

And we thought it'd be really fantastic as part of the series of events that we're doing part of the network to just have that conversation more openly with everyone here. So yeah, I'm just really, really pleased and privileged to welcome both Kate and Lenny Williams here today to discuss their—

[MIC FEEDBACK]

Oh. You hear me? Oh, here we go. OK.

[LAUGHS]

OK. Did you hear what I was saying Kate?

KATE WILLIAMS: Sorry, I didn't. I needed to do something on Teams. I'm not used to Teams. I'm here now.

SAS AMOAH: No problem at all. I was just in a bit of a waffling meander to the fact that you saw the film and you had contacted, I think, maybe, Rehana on one of her tweets. And we couldn't believe actually that you had got in contact with us given that you were one of the reasons that we had been inspired by one of your stories to make the film in the first place. And then we ended up having this connection and had this long conversation about your experiences.

I just thought it would just be really fantastic as part of this series of seminars we're doing for the network if you could just have that same conversation that you had with us, but with other people to give them some insight into what your experience was. Particularly given the fact that the OU made this film partly inspired by what you guys went through. And so that was what we had just said.

So we thought it'd be really cool to just kick off by asking you a few questions. And in the meantime, if anyone does have any specific questions either based on the article that we've shared that they wrote, or anything that we say, please do let us know and we'll pick up those questions afterwards. So my first question was the conflict in the film was wrapped up pretty quickly, and the head teacher didn't push back very much at all. And I wondered was that the same in your experience?

KATE WILLIAMS: No, it definitely wasn't the same for our experience. I'm laughing now. I wasn't laughing a few years ago. Yeah, the head teacher at the school where our children was unfortunately didn't take heed to anything the SFE, local councilors, politicians, anybody. Including when he received court papers. So everything was ignored for 3 and 1/2 years.

But because we were in a confidentiality agreement due to the legal help we were getting from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, we couldn't go to any journalist or anything at that point. But as soon as we were released from that, Ruby did want to share her story publicly which is what everybody saw in February 2020. But the experience actually started in October 2016. So it was a long time after it had begun. So if you add anything, Len.

LENNY WILLIAMS: No, no. I don't. You talked about it all.

SAS AMOAH: OK. So do you mind us, maybe, giving us a bit of a summary in terms of what the experience was and how it started? And then I'll pop on to a few other questions?

KATE WILLIAMS: I mean, you can see from the article. I'm not going to talk about the score here. Because it's been recorded. But you can see from the article and Google it if you want to know the details. But it was a very run of the mill local Hackney school. Not some strict-- very different to your film, actually. So in the film the school is very-- Is it a grammar school or a private school?

SAS AMOAH: Yes, something like that.

KATE WILLIAMS: So the absolute opposite of the school that Ruby was in, which was one of the roughest schools in the borough if not the roughest school. So you know, there were children there with bright blue hair. Any color they wanted, any style they wanted. And I think that was what made it so difficult when Ruby was told that her hair wasn't OK. And the other thing that was confusing as well is that Ruby had actually had that hair for years beforehand, because it was just her hair, and there'd been no complaints from anybody.

So all of a sudden when she was 14, all of a sudden her hair was an issue. But she'd been in the school magazine. She was on the website. And she'd had that same hair since probably year eight. So it was a bit confusing, really. But yeah, they backed themselves in a corner and decided that they were going to threaten to send her home if she didn't change her hair. And eventually they did end up sending her home several times over the course of a couple of years. And we entered into internal complaints to start with. Keeping things friendly and trying to, like, amicably sort it. But it very quickly became obvious that the head teacher was not going to change his mind regardless of what the law said, never mind anybody else. I don't know if you want to say anything else, Len?

LENNY WILLIAMS: No, but that's the point. I mean, he-- Her teacher was adamant that the policy, the school policy, was a just policy fair for everyone. Then when we checked all the other schools in Hackney for their uniform policy, none of them said anything in particular about afro hair. So when Kate contacted the Race Equality Foundation, and when they deemed that passage of afro style hair dash bun has to be reasonable height and length, that directly was discriminative towards a ethnicity of people. So for that case we decided to fight this.

SAS AMOAH: So they hadn't. For any other group of people, they haven't entered a specific type of hair. But your school within the policy itself specifically referred to afro hair?

LENNY WILLIAMS: Yes.

KATE WILLIAMS: It's referred to "afro-style" hair, whatever that meant. But yeah, it said "afro-style" hair. But it had a rule as well about fringes. So part of the defense from the school was that, and this was in the letter, that white children were more likely to be disciplined if their fringe was too long. But yes, Black and mixed race children were more likely to be disciplined over the "afro-style" hair rule. So they actually put that in writing themselves. But didn't think that there was anything strange in writing those sentences that Black and mixed race children were more likely to fall foul of this rule.

So yeah, they really-- I mean, that's why the Equality and Human Rights Commission took the legal case because there was so much. You know, we had, I think, about three binders of evidence for the solicitor to work with because they were very keen on writing letters and even writing things in the newsletter about hairstyles. So there was all this evidence to prove that Black and mixed race children were going to be impacted unfairly compared to other children. And that's what you need if you're using the equality law. You need a comparison.

So the way I've got my hair now is probably shorter than how Ruby had her hair in 2016. But because of the texture of my hair, it's hanging down and it's here. So I would be fine, but Ruby wasn't. It wasn't fine in their eyes. And they just refused to understand the concept of different textures of hair.

SAS AMOAH: So, I mean, it must have been such a surprise. And how did you and Lenny both feel? I can go to you individually. Initially, what was your initial reaction or response when this had first happened?

LENNY WILLIAMS: I mean, for me, I thought that the headteacher had an off day. You don't get sent home for a hair that she's got on her head for all of her life. And you know, pictures on the website. I mean, at that time I wasn't even thinking about the website. Just the fact that she's been sent home for her hair. And you're wondering to yourself, well, is this real or am I in some dream or something? Because you never expect your child to be sent home for their hair. And especially my daughter, Ruby. At times she was spotted from primary school as talented and gifted. Ruby loves school. Ruby would never put herself in a position to be in trouble or to have a teacher speak against her in a certain way. So it was a shock.

SAS AMOAH: What about you, Kate? Anything?

KATE WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think until the day she was actually sent home, I think I just thought it was all some sort of big misunderstanding and that they just didn't understand the way afro hair grew. Which was bizarre, because it was a school in the middle of Hackney with lots of Black teachers and lots of Black and mixed race children. So the things just weren't aligning,

really. Like how can you be a school in the middle of Hackney yet not understand how afro hair grows out of someone's head? And so I suppose as a white parent of mixed race children, it was my first encounter of them facing massive in-your-face racism.

I mean I've seen them encounter other things when I've taken them back up North where I'm from. And that, sort of, positive racism where people would come up to you in the street and say "Oh, aren't they a lovely color?" And you know, that, kind of, really, the stuff that grates on people. But it comes from a place they're trying to Compliment So it's awful, but this was something completely different. This was actually her being denied her education. The fact that they were sending her home in her GCSE years, missing a day of school. And she became a school refuser, really, for those last two years. Her attendance was sometimes only 65, 70% if we were lucky.

So yeah, I'm still in shock about it. I think like Lenny said, it felt like a dream at the time. It still does feel like a dream and I don't know when I'll wake up from it. But in the meantime, my intention is for us to as a family to just work hard to make sure another child doesn't go through what Ruby went through, really. But yeah, shock and confusion.

SAS AMOAH: And I suppose when you expressed that to the headteacher in the initial conversations explaining to him that you've probably got this the wrong way around, don't quite understand what the objection is, how was that? How did that communication go? How did it develop up when you slightly pushed back and said I think there's an issue here where you're having a go at her hair and that doesn't make sense because that's just the way it grows?

KATE WILLIAMS: I mean, unfortunately I work in a school. You know, teachers we're all people. We're all individuals and it comes down to personalities. I'm sure it's the same working in a University, everyone's got their own personality. And it did seem to just come down to personality. We were told. I was told very early on by her head of year, the head teacher will never change his mind. "He will never ever change his mind, so my advice to you is to change her hair. He will never back down."

And I remember standing in the kitchen at work on the phone thinking, how can you? How-- For her to say that to me, she doesn't know me. And I just told her straight, I said, well, you can let him know from me that I will never back down. And that I don't care how long this takes to solve, you will change your hair policy because it's illegal. And it's not fair on Ruby and it's not fair on any other child in your school with afro-textured hair. So I don't care how stubborn he is, he hasn't met me.

[LAUGHTER]

SAS AMOAH: And over the course of the duration, were there any suggestions in terms of trying to even negotiate a middle ground that the faculty or the head teacher had suggested as a as a means of compromise from his perspective?

LENNY WILLIAMS: There's no compromise. As far as he concerned, it was his way or no way. Even when he suggested to my daughter that he doesn't care if she comes in with a hair blue or straight, her natural, the way she was wearing it naturally, is unacceptable. Now her dad, I've never cut my hair in, what, 40 or more years of my life. I don't know what it's like to have a scissors in my hair.

So my daughter seen me, her dad, never cut his hair, yeah. And her mom, who never goes and, like, dyes her hair or wears her hair in any funky different colors. So she's always been grounded as a child to see that her dad and her mom, whether of two different ethnicities, are at one, at peace, with the way she wears her hair.

So for someone else to come along to tell her that her natural hair that grows out of her head is unacceptable, I would fight this anywhere we go.

KATE WILLIAMS: I mean, so some of the suggestions they made to her, one suggestion was she was asked on her own at 14. In a room on her own with an older white man, he asked her have you ever considered chemically relaxing your hair. Because he'd done some research the night before. He'd done some research for her and he thought that would make her hair smaller. Had she ever considered that. So that was one thing.

And then a Black teacher, a Black female teacher, suggested to me when I was crying on the phone saying I really don't understand what it is you want me to do. This was the day that she'd actually-- Ruby had gone in with bunches here and her hair out. And I think she was an assistant head teacher, something like that, she'd said to Ruby, "You're going to get sent home if he sees you with your hair like that. You will be sent home, let me help you. Can I help you?"

And this teacher and another teacher took Ruby into a room. And the teacher used her own hair bubbles and tried to kind of squash Ruby's hair into the heads. I don't know, like-- You know, where you twist your hair around and it sticks? But because Ruby's hair is, sort of, more fluffy afro, it wouldn't stick. So when I was speaking to this teacher later that day and said, look, I honestly don't know what you want us to do with her hair. Her hair is her hair. And she said "Oh, ma'am, I know what you mean because I was trying to help Ruby with her hair this morning and it kept bouncing out. It didn't matter what I did, it kept bouncing out."

And I said, you did what? You touched my child's hair? And she said, "Oh, Ruby said it was OK. She said it was OK." And I said, well, I didn't say it was OK. I didn't give you permission to touch my daughter's hair. You're telling me this isn't a racist rule? How many white children did you take into a room on their own this morning to try and fix their hair?

And then she suggested had I thought about cutting up my old tights and I could squash her hair into my old tights and she could go to school like that. So I said to her, if you were 14 would you want to go to school with your mom's old tights on your head? Like does that sound like a reasonable thing that you're suggesting? So it was these sort of bizarre suggestions which made it more painful, actually, because it showed how little they valued her or her self esteem. Yeah.

SAS AMOAH: Thanks for sharing Kate. I know this is difficult, but we really appreciate it. It also goes to the heart of the ignorance when it comes to dealing with hair from an African-Caribbean background. The fact that a teacher has gone online, done a Google search, and decided, oh, we can chemically relaxed someone's hair completely oblivious to the consequences of that kind of treatment on the scalp on their hair. And thinking it's a completely legitimate question to ask having no idea about the consequences of the action.

It really does, I think, in so many ways your case highlights the complexities of different types of racisms. That people challenge, the institutional challenges, the ignorance. And not even being conscious of the power balance between the grown teacher taking a student away without a guardian and laying their hands on them. It really, really is shocking.

I mean, how did you guys feel when, I suppose, you find that even teachers of color, or teachers, maybe, from a shared background as Ruby, seem to align themselves with the head teacher's stance on the issue?

LENNY WILLIAMS: Well for me, the anger. I couldn't hold the anger because when the same teacher who Kate was talking about-- When we eventually got a meeting with the head teacher to sit down and try and work this out. And we asked the pastor from the church that I attend to go and come along with us. And even he at the time thought the whole issue was something that could be easily resolved. He didn't think it was as bad as it was until he went along with us to this meeting.

And when the teacher who Kate was talking about was to explain to me-- Now mind you, at this time Ruby really liked the teacher. So Ruby didn't really want anything to be heard of badly against this teacher. But when this teacher is pushing to tell me that she tried to help my daughter sort her hair out. And I knew what she wanted to tell me. And I didn't want to hear it, but she was pushing to tell me.

So when she said that she tried to put these hair bands in my daughter's head. And I told her straight, you know, that as far as I'm concerned is an assault. You assaulted my daughter. You had no rule, no law to touch my daughter's hair. And furthermore, when my daughter looks in the mirror, she doesn't see your reflection. Now the teacher took offense to that saying that I was being racist towards her. Now this is a Black teacher who's got her hair-- No disrespect the way she wears her hair, but her hair is slicked straight to her head, yeah. It's so straight, I mean you could have drive a car in it and it would have just left tire marks, yeah.

But that's the way she wants to wear her hair. But you can't then tell my daughter that that's the way she must wear it or how she must wear her hair. So I took offense to that. And she deemed me as being racist towards her. And she didn't want to have any conversation or anything to do with me from that period till whenever the case got sorted.

KATE WILLIAMS: I mean, the truth is this white haired teacher weaponized his Black teachers who were in positions of seniority. So the two senior Black teachers, he weaponized them. One a woman, one a man. And that was very confusing for Ruby. So she had this Black male teacher, in a position of great authority over her, pulling out his phone and showing her pictures of his mixed race children. So he'd had children with a white woman. And showing Ruby that his daughter had the same texture hair as her.

And telling her straight, "If this was a racist school do you honestly think I could work here? If this was a racist school, I would leave right now. I would not work here if I thought this was a racist school." And Ruby tried to reason with him and explain, "Well, why when I'm sitting next to-- This morning, I was sitting next to whoever in whatever lesson. She's a white girl. She's got blonde hair down to her hips and she's swishing it around. It's touching me, it's going everywhere. No one says anything but my hair here is an issue? How? How can you explain that to me?"

And he couldn't. And he gave her an ultimatum. This was, like, the last day she was in school, actually. The solicitor advised her not to return and just to go back for her exam. So this was her last actual day in school. And he gave her an ultimatum and said you either contain your hair, or you leave, or you go home. And she said, well, send me home then because I'm done. This particular day, she'd gone in. How the day had started for her is she'd gone in and her friend had told her the previous day that the head teacher had taken a picture down from a display board where she'd been up as star of the week for some high quality homework. And her friend told her, "Your picture's been taken down by the head teacher."

So the next day, Ruby went to the teacher directly and said "Where's my picture, Miss?" And the teacher said, "Oh, Ruby you know, I'm sorry. He came in and he saw. He saw the picture,

and because your hair-- Because your hair was here in the picture, he's taken it down because it breaks the rules." Now how can a picture break the rules? This was a school picture, by the way. This was a picture they'd taken of her some years previously.

And she just had enough that day. And so she had her hair in some sort of contained way. And she just took it out and asked for a comb. Someone in the class gave her a comb. And she just started combing her hair out in the classroom. And she said, "I'm done trying to follow this rule, because even when I try and follow it he won't stop picking on me. He won't stop even when I'm following the rule."

And that was the day. So that was with the day she got this ultimatum. So and even then, the teacher rang Lenny and said, "Oh, Ruby's not feeling-- She's not feeling great. She wants to come home." So even then he wasn't truthful. He didn't actually say to Lenny, "I've given her an ultimatum and she's chosen to go home." He tried to make out like he was looking after Ruby by sending her home.

And we just rang the solicitor straight away that day. And he said, this is now gone into victimization. This is not just discrimination. And he added it to the court case. He added that event to the court case, actually. There was that which was victimization, and there was also in the year book. The person who was in charge of the year 11 year book. All the other children in the year book had their pictures when they were 15 or 16. And when we went to collect the year book at parents evening and we opened it up-- Oh no.

We didn't even see it first. Ruby started getting messages as we left parents evening. And her friends were messaging saying, Ruby, have a look in the book. Have a look in the book. And when we looked, to our horror, they'd used her year seven picture when she was 11 years old and her hair had been straightened. Not with relaxer just with straighteners, and it was just tied back like this. And she looked like a baby. She was unrecognizable. She was 11. She's now-- She was 16 by then.

And that is the memory that whole cohort have of their peers like going from year seven all the way up to year 11. So that was an act of victimization as well. That act of victimization happened before the court case, so that was part of the court case. But the photo coming off the wall was actually after they'd been served court papers. They were served court papers and the following week, this is what they did to her.

And the solicitor had promised Ruby because she was scared to do court proceedings. Who wouldn't be? What, you know-- What child wouldn't be scared to take their school to court? And she was adamant she didn't want to leave that school. She didn't want to change schools because all her friends were there. She liked 95% of the teachers. She was doing well

academically. So she didn't want to leave. And the solicitor promised her, "I promise you they will not do anything to you if we submit court papers. No organization would ever do anything to someone who who'd submitted court papers because then that's victimization."

So for her to have that reassurance from this top solicitor, and then for her to exactly experience the thing she was scared of, it was horrible. And that same-- Then when she started doing her exams, she had teachers waiting for her outside the exam room. You know, like, two Black teachers waiting for her outside the exam room that when she was writing her exam she could see them. She could she could see them waiting for her to send her home. Because she couldn't—

How dare she have a laugh and joke with her friends after her exams and be part of the school community. She was there to do her exam and then she was escorted off the premises because she refused to tie her hair away anymore. And those kind of things will never leave her. You know? Those scars. Yeah. So I can't remember the question.

[LAUGHTER]

SAS AMOAH: I suppose you touched upon it briefly in the beginning, but it would have been one of the first times, maybe, from your perspective Kate that you had seen this kind of discrimination. And I suppose—

[STAMMERS]

I'm curious to find out between yourself Len, because you've probably-- It's probably not the first time you've encountered challenges like this in your life. And I suppose for you Kate, it might have been more of an eye opener. I'm just curious to see on learning this information, how you both responded in terms of what you were experiencing?

LENNY WILLIAMS: I think for me, I mean, I've always grown up knowing the racism that's in your face, you know. What you-- When someone sees me, they're already judging me. So I don't need to open my mouth, just the looks alone. But you know, when Ruby experienced what she experienced, that hurt. Because you'd never expect your child to suffer racism, especially in school. It's different if it was out on the street with her peers on the street. But this is school and this is the head teacher.

So for me, I was-- Anger was just part of me. I mean, I remember saying to him when we did have a meeting that you just open a can of worms you wished you never opened. Because I knew that, for me, this was not going to just-- I was not going to lay down on this. I would fight

this to wherever, whatever. Because the fact of the matter is she's, you know-- This is a Church of England school, if I can say that, and this is the policies that this headteacher has got.

And you know, at that time I was so angry that I was using references to things like the Queen of England sits as the head of the Church of England school and one of these schools has got a racist policy. How can this be? My head was just beating all over the place. And I think for me-- and Kate would answer for herself. But the family suffered because we had a son still going to the school. We had Jacob still going to the school.

And we kept, you know, saying to him we're just hoping that nothing comes back on him because of what's going on with Ruby. But I have to give him praises, because he just knuckled down and got on with what he had to get on with in school. But this could have-- It could have damaged us as a family, but I think it made us stronger because we were united in this fight. Yeah.

SAS AMOAH: And Kate?

KATE WILLIAMS: Can you repeat the question? I forgot. Was listening to Len, I'm sorry.

SAS AMOAH: Just in terms of, maybe, the first time you've seen this type of discrimination firsthand and what that was like for you. And maybe, it wasn't as much of a surprise for Lenny, but what that experience was like for you to see it happen.

KATE WILLIAMS: I mean, I've tried to explain this to Ruby the last couple of years because she's 21 now. And if you think back 21 years ago, I don't know people on the call would agree with me or not. But people didn't really think that deeply about having mixed race children. It was like you kind of fell in love with someone as, oh, let's have a baby. And you don't-- It's not really it wasn't something as a white parent living in Hackney, London.

It wasn't something I really thought about. It was more a case of making sure she understood. Or her and her brother, making sure they understood-- I can see Guyana on Lenny's neck. You know, that they're half Guyanese, what that means. Making sure they understood about their dad being a rasta. Making-- I kind of-- I raised them to for them to choose themselves whether they termed themselves as Black or mixed raced and all that kind of stuff.

But it wasn't really something that we thought about very deeply, I don't think, parents of mixed race children 21 years ago. And I hope now that people do think about it more. I suppose I had a very rude awakening as a white parent of mixed race children with this. And yeah, I was very naive. I'd never even heard of afro hair discrimination before this happened to Ruby. It wasn't something I knew happened to people.

I knew that name discrimination could happen. And that's one of the reasons that Ruby's called Ruby and Jacob's called Jacob. I knew that job applications and things like that, you could be discriminated against. So yeah, I had a rude awakening and I've been on a very steep learning curve ever since. And Ruby is my main teacher. She's the person I'm bothered what she thinks.

So another Black person might tell me, and I have been told categorically, I should have changed her hair. I should have made her abide the rules. I've been told that by Black parents and by white parents. But the person who I care who thinks whether I did the right thing or not is Ruby. And she never faltered from the first day when it happened. She never ever faltered. We gave her so many opportunities to stop. And to say, you know, you've already made a point. You know, we can leave it in the hands of the MP. We can we can fight behind the scenes in other ways. You don't have-- You don't have to be the person to do this.

And even Lenny sitting at our church at the moment. I remember our youth pastor at the time was very worried about Ruby's mental health before we went to court. And he met with Ruby privately to almost say to her don't do it. It's going to be it's going to be too hard. It's going to it's going to destroy you. You don't have to do this.

But she was adamant. So she's my teacher. And Lenny, of course, but she's my teacher what it is to be mixed race in Hackney in that specific circumstance to that specific family. But yeah, I'm still naive. I'm still learning. I still say the wrong thing. I think, you know, it feels weird being a white woman being so immersed and obsessed with fighting afro hair discrimination. It's a-- You know, it's something I struggle with because I don't want to make other people feel uncomfortable or speak in places where it's not my place to speak.

But this did happen to my child. And me being white in some ways is irrelevant. You know, I'm just a mom who fought for her daughter. And I'm also a teacher. And I actually feel that white teachers need to be the ones to make a stand about this. I don't think this should be on the shoulders of Black teachers. I think they've got plenty to be getting on with already. It's not Black teachers' responsibility to fix this. Black teachers didn't create this. So I think it's something white teachers need to be—

They don't even need to know about it. They just need to listen and believe people. They don't even need to understand how afro hair grows. They don't need to understand why certain ways you wear your hair are significant. They don't need to understand why Lenny is wearing a rasta crown. They don't need to understand any of that. They just need to mind their own business, and listen, and be respectful, really. Really long answer, sorry.

SAS AMOAH: Very, very poignant answer, actually, as well. You touched upon there, kind of, and everyone's seen how traumatic the entire process was. And you mentioned that, actually, the pastor was very concerned about Ruby's mental health. And I suppose the next question is, kind of, for all of you, how was your mental health throughout the entire process? How did you guys manage it? It must have been incredibly challenging at certain points.

KATE WILLIAMS: I mean, we won't go into details about Ruby's mental health as things out there already in newspaper articles that she shared. But she's not here to talk for herself. She did help write the article, so her voice is in that article as well. But she did, we'll just say, you know, she did suffer immensely. And she is still carrying those scars. I think they're helped-- The scars are helped by the campaigning work that she does. And you know, being involved with Dove and with Halo Code and all of the things that she's involved with. I think that does help her.

Myself, I started in 2016. And I was so worried about Ruby, I think I lost sight of myself completely. And I had a complete breakdown in 2018, which I realized here at work when I shouted at a colleague who was the loveliest person you could ever imagine. And I shouted at her about something which wasn't her fault. And then realized, oh, maybe everyone's right. Maybe I am a little bit unhinged at the moment.

I was so consumed by rage I couldn't-- What I couldn't understand and I still can't understand is it didn't matter how many different ways I explained it. I would send, you know, five page letters with you know references and research and links and videos. It didn't matter how much I explained it, he refused to understand. And that rage of being ignored of all the solicitor's letters.

Because we were represented first by Just for Kids Law for the first 18 months. And then we were taken over by Simpson-Miller and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. So all of those solicitor's letters being ignored. The MP was ignored. Local councilors were ignored. The DFE wrote to them three times and they were ignored. In the end, my mom actually took the letter and hand-delivered it to the headteacher so he couldn't pretend that he hadn't received this letter from the DFE demanding that we had a complaints panel, like a review panel.

But I think being ignored-- I don't think you realize how damaging it is to your mental health to be ignored until you are being ignored. And it's just a horrible thing to do to someone. And I feel very defensive of parents when I see teachers talking about difficult parents or parents who complain all the time. And the headteacher was actually given permission, by the governor by the chair of governors, to ignore us. That was actually in the paperwork. I remember reading that in a letter that he'd been told by the chair of governors to just ignore us.

And I just think you should never ignore parents. You should never ignore children. You should never ignore your pupils. Even if you don't agree with them, you need to give them space to talk about what it is they're not happy with. So yeah, I had a complete breakdown. But I still managed to come to work every day, actually. Work was my-- Work was the place where I felt sane.

But family life, it was very, very difficult because we were watching Ruby, sort of, disintegrate and we were helpless. And your job as a parent is to protect your child and to keep them safe in this world. And when you can't do that, you have this feeling of failure that I don't know if I'll ever shake that to be honest. That I didn't keep her safe in a place where she should have been safe. The world is a dangerous place.

You know, I've raised two children in Hackney. I didn't breathe until my son was 18. And you know, now I'm not so stressed. He's 19, he's out of that danger zone. But you're raising children in a place like Hackney, you have fear. How can you not have fear? But you shouldn't have fear about school, about teachers. You should have fear about other children, maybe. But you shouldn't be fearing them being bullied by teachers that are paid to look after them.

So but I-- I had to keep going, so I had therapy through work. And then when that wasn't enough I had cognitive behavioral therapy through the GP. And I'm not OK. I'm still not OK. My experiment is doing this doctorate. I hope by researching afro hair discrimination in schools at a doctorate level, it's an experiment to see if that helps me heal. But don't know if I'll ever heal, to be honest.

SAS AMOAH: But I think what you've managed to do, actually, in turning what is such an awful set of events into something-- I mean, the fact that you're even here with us sharing your experiences, like I said, we're really grateful. But also it's the-- How does that-- Does that help you feel in some way? I know I sent around lots of different articles that had been written. You've written since subsequently, kind of, getting the story out. Communicating this issue that lots of kids are still going through.

I mean, there was a case just recently in the news where there's a case of hair discrimination. How have you managed to influence-- You've, kind of, channeled all this kind of pain and suffering into something because it's really positive and productive. I don't know if you want to tell us a bit about your PhD, the research you're doing, and the various kind of bits you're doing like this?

KATE WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think, maybe, it's the antidote of being ignored for 3 and 1/2 years that the fact that people are interested in what, primarily, what Ruby has to say. But Ruby, we're very mindful of her trauma now. The first year she did lots of things and talked at lots of different

events. And you know, it's costly to her. It's emotionally costly to her. So we're very mindful now about how much she does. And we talk about what she does and what she doesn't do.

But for me, I have to say, you know, we spoke to so many journalists afterwards. And every time we spoke about it, I cried a little bit less. I think the first person we saw, he was trapped at our house for about four hours, I think. You know, that poor guy. But I think you know, it doesn't make it less painful. But it gives it purpose. I think if the pain she has gone through, which in turn has caused me and her dad pain. And everyone who loved her.

I mean, you know, all of the extended family and community at church. You know, everyone watched what happened to Ruby and everybody felt helpless. You know our MP is Meg Hillier, and I will respect her for the rest of my life because she was amazing. And she cared from the first-- We saw her the first month it happened and she followed the case all the way through. The same with the mayor of Hackney and the deputy mayor of Hackney.

These people were invested in what was happening to Ruby. But they were all powerless to help her. Which is crazy, right? How can the mayor of Hackney be powerless to help? How can the DFE be powerless to help? How can the dioceses, the London board of dioceses, be powerless to help? All these people were powerless to help.

And I think that was the thing for me that I just couldn't get my head around. How? How can these people in such positions of authority have no power over a head teacher? And it's because it's not in statutory education law. That's the truth. Even though it's in equality law, even though it's in the guidance, it's-- They've just updated. The government have just updated their uniform guidance. But it's just guidance for school, it's not statutory. So schools can ignore it and they do.

And that's, I suppose, as a teacher, that's what I would like to see changed. I'd like to see it in statutory education law. So maybe that's a goal at some point. But the doctorate is it was actually 2020 when after George Floyd had been murdered and I was-- The pandemic was happening, so I wasn't allowed to be at work. So I had probably had too much time. And I was probably going a little bit around the bend like everybody else. And I was looking into hair discrimination a lot.

And I kept seeing all these young people on Twitter talking about-- It was all different sorts of racism that they'd experienced. Because when Black Lives Matter, you know, everybody started sharing all of their past traumas, didn't they? But hair seemed to be something that was popping up a lot. And people were saying I got told off at school for having a shape up, I got told off for having a fade.

And I just kept thinking someone needs to research this. It can't be that teachers are doing this to Black children. You know, what difference does a fade hair cut make to a child in maths GCSE? Like what difference does-- You know even like a line. So what? If a child wants a line here, what difference does it make to you? It's the same as my parting, isn't it? I have a parting here. Afro hair doesn't do that, so you put a line in. Like just so—

And then I just kept hearing this little voice saying, well you do it then. You do it. You're a teacher. You've already got your master's. You do the research. So I emailed my supervisor from my master's and said, oh, this has happened to my daughter. I'm thinking of doing a PhD. What do you think? I'm around the bend. And he emailed back and said, no, you should definitely do it. And this is a supervisor you should ask for. And you should do the EdD rather than the PhD because then you'll be part of a cohort.

And that's what I'm doing. So I'm at the IOE just over there. And I'm just coming up to the end of my second year at the doctorate. So the idea is to leave a legacy for Ruby. That there will be a piece of research. Not about her, she won't feature in it, but about the issue. And other parent's voices, and other children's voices, and, ultimately, in the thesis, school leader's voices. And just delving into this issue a bit deeper about where do these-- Why do you care if a child's got a fade? Why do you care if a girl has a red strand going through her extension? What difference does it make to school life?

So I still don't understand why teachers care so I'm going to research it.

[LAUGHS]

SAS AMOAH: I'm well excited to see that research as well. OK, I don't know. Rehana have you had a chance to just keep an eye on the chat? I don't know if any questions have come through or, kind of, any comments that you just wanted to draw attention to while we give Kate and Lenny just a minute to (LAUGHS) relax after they've shared so much valuable information from their personal story.

REHANA AWAN: Thanks, Sas. There is a huge amount of support for you, particularly, Kate and what you've gone through. Lots of-- There's a call for you to be PM at one point.

[LAUGHTER]

Also a lot of shock and horror, actually. Anna's commented, which I thought was actually quite poignant, about it actually being abuse of Ruby. And her comment is about how horrific the abuse is of poor Ruby. And then there's lots of comments about that you're both awesome

parents, both you and Lenny. You know, fighting for Ruby has been incredible. And you know, she's incredibly lucky to have you. Incredibly blessed to have you.

Some other reports that you've written. So the Guardian report is in there as well. And Jackie shared a report from the states as well. And some, interestingly as well, some stuff around the head teacher. So talking about what a bully he actually was or is. But also how the governors should have reacted differently and they should have actually been calling for his resignation rather than making suggestions about him ignoring you. And that teachers are there to educate. And just to say even while you were talking around that, I was, like, you know, we send our school our kids to school, don't we? And we expect them to be safe. You know that's the one other place apart from home you expect them to be protected and safe. And you've had that trust, and Ruby's had that trust, really diminished by the experience.

You know and there's also some stuff around whether or not the church chair of governors was a priest as well and how awful that actually is. So no questions as such, but lots, I mean, so much support about that Ruby's a real credit to you. This is Melanie's last comment here and actually she suggests that you should be going around to all the schools. And she'd fund it if she could for you to share this experience to educate schools on this matter.

Which is really, kind of, you are doing that to a certain extent as well, aren't you. That's part of the plan as well.

KATE WILLIAMS: I think my head-- My head teacher has been very understanding already. That might be pushing it a bit.

[LAUGHTER]

REHANA AWAN: Yeah, not every school.

KATE WILLIAMS: I'd be in her office right now. But yeah, I think, yeah. I might not be released that much. I mean, coming back to the church things that I spent after the court case was settled and the story had hit the news. And one of the lasting pains for Ruby is that no one ever apologized to her. So the school, even though they'd offered a settlement, even though she'd receive compensation, the school never actually acknowledged any wrongdoing. And nobody from the school ever actually apologized.

And so that was very painful for her. So I actually decided that perhaps an apology from the church might help. Because it was a Church of England school, I thought maybe in part-- Because the church knew it was happening all along. The church got involved very early. And

I started a quest to try and get the church to apologize. Our faith is very important to us as a family. You know, Lenny is there sitting in our church as we speak. So it was—

I went to a lot of different people to try and get an apology for Ruby from the church. And I specifically went to Black people within church leadership thinking that they would understand more and that they would get an apology. And one very high up Black leader in the church sent me a song. Sent me a lovely email and congratulated us for supporting Ruby.

And sent me a song, which I won't sing. But it's that song, if they build-- "The higher they build their barriers, the taller I will become." And she said this was the song that she'd used to help raise her Black children in London that if you reach barriers, you grow taller. And I emailed back and said, respectfully, I don't agree with you at all. My children should not come across barriers any different to any other children.

And I'm interested in abolishing those barriers. I'm not interested in my children having to become taller. And I think that's, Ruby and Jacob's generation, that's the difference now. I think this lady is older than me and, perhaps, when she first came to this country from the Caribbean, perhaps, that is how she had to raise her children. But we're 2023, now and actually we need to abolish those barriers. And we need to challenge it. And I think, you know, she meant well but it wasn't helpful. And I didn't get an apology for Ruby from the church.

REHANA AWAN: And Maxine's just something quite shocking in the chat box that when her mom was at school, the white teachers would cut her mom's hair. So that's quite shocking. Roberta's got a question. And Roberta is asking what advice would you give for some of us that are governors at local schools? What would you expect, or what would you've wanted, your governing body to do? That's a brilliant question, Berta. Thank you.

KATE WILLIAMS: I'll put-- I'll find a link and put it in there now. I mean, the Equality and Human Rights Commission took Ruby's case very seriously. They also had another case running at the same time which was a little boy, Chikayzea Flanders. I don't know if you guys remember that story with a boy with dreadlocks who was put in isolation on his first day in year seven.

So they had Ruby's case and Chikayzea's case both at the same time. His case settled very quickly. Ruby's case rumbled on for many years. But they've continued to research it. And you know, they actually included us in researching this as well. So they've created this fantastic guidance which I'm just putting in the chat now. Which any school-- So school governors, anybody, can go through that guidance and check your policy.

And you know, you'll see from that guidance it's very, very thorough. And they've used Ruby's story as one of the case studies. And yeah, I'm just seeing in the chat there. I don't know which—

REHANA AWAN: Is that the right story?

KATE WILLIAMS: No that's-- He had dreadlocks this boy. I don't know. Which story is that one?

REHANA AWAN: That's just a-- It's about a white boy, I think.

KATE WILLIAMS: Oh. Yeah, yeah. It's a different a different story. I'll find a story about Chikayzea and pop it in there as well. But actually, I don't need to because his story is a case study in the guidance.

REHANA AWAN: In the?

KATE WILLIAMS: Yeah.

REHANA AWAN: Brilliant.

KATE WILLIAMS: But yeah, I would say, I think like I said earlier, it's about listening and respecting. So you don't have to understand everything. As a school governor, as a teacher-- You know, I'm a primary school teacher. You cannot possibly be an expert in every single subject so you have to research as you're going along. If you're suddenly doing a topic on rainforest, you have to swot up on it yourself.

And that's the same being a governor. You can't possibly know everything about every single child in your school so that's why this guidance exists. I don't know if you want to add anything Len. You were a governor for how many years Len?

LENNY WILLIAMS: Six years. But that's the thing with our case. The headteacher of the school where Ruby was didn't know the background of me and Kate. That we were both school governors to Kate was a teacher. And I do a parenting program called Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities. So all the time when we were being subjected to what we were subject-- Ruby was subjected to it just felt like as if, to me, being retrained again.

Because I'm there with a headteacher. I went on a training to, you know, it was to become a school governor and realized that it's not easy to run a school. And the head teacher having the other teachers on board, it's like a captain of a ship, you know. If the captain steers the ship and everyone else is there to steer the ship in a nice and orderly way. But you know, we're dealing with a captain here who did not listen to his crew, or did not care about the crew. And

definitely didn't care about the passengers, which is the children. So he made the rules as he went along or as he sees fit.

One of the point things I want to put across is that Bob Marley sang a song. And a lot of people don't understand the fullness of what the song-- Where the song came about we've had a lot of great leaders around the world. You know, Marcus Garvey, a poetic talker. We've had Martin Luther King. We've had Gandhi. You know, even Winston Churchill.

All these people have made quotes and have said things. But the one thing that's poignant that Bob sang about was a person called Haile Selassie. When his country was to be invaded in the '30s by the Italians, he went to the League of Nations. Which you don't do at that time because you're a leader. But he went and he did a speech. And Bob sang a snippet of that speech in his song.

"Until the philosophy that holds one race superior to another is permanently and finally diminished." Now when you listen to them words, "Until the philosophy." We're living in a world now where that philosophy is-- It's a philosophy that if you don't toe the line, anything can happen. But if you voice your concerns, you're then alienated, yeah.

I'm a human being. Everyone on this program now listening, they're human beings. We've all got children or we got nieces and nephews. And we want them to grow in a world of love and unity. And if we start having rules that sets nations and sets children against one another because of hair or because of color, we're not going to move any more forward, you know.

It took George Floyd to be killed in the way he was killed for people to say "Oh, Black Lives Matter." My life was mattering from the time I was born. But it took things to happen for people to say these things. We need change and we need change fast. Because what me and Kate and Ruby and Jacob went through as a family, we don't want no other child to go through this at all.

You know, coming home to your parents. Telling your parents that you were sent home because the teacher didn't like the way my hair sat on my head, which grows naturally. And to me that's unacceptable, yeah.

KATE WILLIAMS: And I think one of the worst things about it is a lot of these teachers who are doing these sorts of hair policies, or really strong, really over the top behavior policies. In their heads, they've been so brainwashed, that they think they're helping the poor working class children. You know, they think this is the way they're going to get the best chance in life. If I teach them how to change their hair, how to modify their language, how to dress in a way that they're not going to look like they're from Hackney, then they will be successful in this life.

And I think that's the thing that what you're saying about the hierarchy. I mean, that that's the problem with white people. We've been brainwashed to think that we're the blueprint. And it couldn't be further from the truth if you look into the history where human beings were first found. But how do you-- How do you unbrainwash people to think that they're somehow the chosen race? I don't know. I don't know.

REHANA AWAN: And that's even harder, isn't it, in a climate of austerity. And you know, when we-- Our gas and our petrol and all of those things. You know, it smacks of fascism and the rise of fascism, doesn't it, in these sorts of situations. So I've got a question if that's all right. Kind of chat host privilege. And I was just thinking, you know, looking back now, I mean, clearly you both had PTSD, or you have PTSD and the experiences.

And I think it's wonderful that Ruby is flourishing and she's at University now. But looking back now, what would you do differently? So if, you know, that happens again that first time, what would you do differently?

LENNY WILLIAMS: I don't think we could have done anything different. Because if we did anything different, most probably the outcome we wouldn't be sitting here talking. Because the fact of the matter is we could have just as well said, you know what, Ruby? We'll find you another school. Or you know, did what the headteacher said. Straightened her hair or done something that eventually, maybe, I'd be sitting here—

I don't know maybe my relationship with my daughter would be different in the sense. Because if I went against the will of how I feel she should be able to express herself and change that, I doubt if my relationship with my daughter would be as great as it is now.

KATE WILLIAMS: I mean, one of the things we've done since Ruby's story became public. I mean, it was very hard because not only were we being ignored by the school, we were also silenced because of this confidentiality agreement. Which was a legally binding agreement. So if we had spoken to a local journalist or even spoken to anyone we didn't really trust and the story had been leaked in some way, we could have been liable for the entire legal bill.

So it was it was a serious-- It was, kind of, we were being ignored and silenced at the same time. Which was really strange. But I think one of the things we did very early on, because we started working with World Afro Day before the story came out actually. We'd contacted them so they knew it was coming. Because we wanted her story to amplify what was already happening, you know. Like the good works that people were already doing.

We don't have to keep recreating the wheel. If people have already poured their heart and soul into campaigns, then Ruby's story should add weight to that rather than starting something new. But with their help we started a parent support group. So they already had parents that this had happened to their children. And we came together as a group and we add to that group in number. Every time we hear of a story, we invite them to that group.

It's just it's a private group on Facebook. It's nothing, you know. It's not a big deal. But it's been a place where people can share their pain and support each other. And I think the problem is everything has to happen in a process. And I will never understand why my daughter had to be the one to have such a prolonged torture and be damaged so deeply. And she's not thriving, I'm afraid. She's not thriving.

But in order now for parents to be able-- I help parents, sometimes, write letters to their head teachers. And I actually have written head teachers myself quite often. And I'll put links to the BBC stories and, you know, to the documentaries. And I'll say straight in the letters, do you want this to happen to your school? Because I know lots of journalists now and this can happen very easily to your school. And your school will be embarrassed. And they will be dragged on Twitter and on Instagram and whatever, you know.

So that threat is there now, but it wasn't there before. So in a way you needed the legal cases of Ruby and of Chikayzea. You needed those legal cases so that the Equality and Human Rights Commission would create this guidance that I've just shared, so that it's now in government literature.

I mean, in the-- I don't know if you guys saw the Inclusive Britain thing that came out. Was it last year or the year before? The big plan where they had, like, 70 action points to make Britain inclusive. Have you seen it, Sas? I'll send it to you.

But one of the actions-- One of the actions was, actually, make it sorting this issue out. And they named Ruby and the school in this government document. And so it's added weight to protect these other children, I suppose. But I'm not going to lie, I wish it wasn't my daughter that had to face that pain.

Would I do anything differently? I don't know, because you can only do what you can do in that day. I had no idea that it was going to turn into such a monstrous situation for her and for us. I honestly thought that I'd send the first email, and they'd go, "Oh, of course we can't specify afro hair in our policy. What were we thinking? Quick rewrite the policy. Quick, before anyone sees it."

I never for one minute thought that they would dig their heels in for 3 and 1/2 years until they were dragged through the courts. And even then, they didn't change their policy, actually, until we dragged them through the papers. It was only when the first stories started hitting the papers that they agreed to change their policy, actually. The bad publicity that they experienced.

So I don't know. I mean, you can only do what you can do at the time that you're in it. I just wish the whole thing hadn't happened to her to be honest. I wish-- I wish she'd walked down a different corridor that day. I wish that he hadn't noticed her. I wish he'd been able to get through school unscathed and go out into the big bright world. I mean, when she was choosing University, her main thing was to go somewhere that was mixed because she couldn't bear the thought of going somewhere and experiencing overt racism again.

REHANA AWAN: Thank you. I'd just like to say, you know, you're both totally, incredibly inspiring. So thank you.

KATE WILLIAMS: So I've just seen someone's just asked "Can we do anything with this guidance? Do you need to be a governor?" No, I would say anyone can send that guidance to any teacher, anywhere. If you think that the school that you know or there's young people in your community who are being policed because of their hair in this way, then you can send this guidance to the head teacher just as a concerned citizen.

You don't have to be a parent. You don't have to be a governor. Just as a citizen, if you want help let's us know. I'm happy to help with anyone who wants to do that.

SAS AMOAH: Thank you. Thank you so much Kate for your answer and Lenny as well. We're only got a couple of minutes left, so just wondering is there any other questions that anyone did want to ask either in the chat or in person while we have Kate and Lenny? I think we must have covered everything that people were thinking, which is very good. It means we got all the different angles.

I just wanted to, kind of, offer our sincerest, absolute sincerest thank you for both of you for taking your time and sharing your experiences with us. You can't begin to understand how much we appreciate that you really did take the time to do this and share what is a very challenging and very traumatic story with us. But we'll all take it with us, I can assure you. And we'll make sure we take on the good work.

But like we've said in the past, please do share any more information. We've got, like, a network on the BME email list and our friends Allies' list as well. And we'd be very grateful to share anything that you wouldn't mind sharing with us. Also I know the stuff that you've been sharing

is really important because half 5:00 was when people were supposed to go home. And everyone's, kind of, stayed to hear you talk. So thank you so much.

I don't know if there's anything either of you wanted to say just before we sign off?

KATE WILLIAMS: Well, thank you for making such a beautiful film as well. And you know, changing it into a different and interesting story in a different way to ours as well. I think it's a really beautiful film. And I hope the training as well-- I've shared it with a few people. The fact that training is available free for anyone to do. That's the other thing that people can do, I suppose, is send that training to schools as well.

You know, I've shared it with my deputy head teacher. I think we're going to be doing it in our next inset day, so.

SAS AMOAH: Wonderful. Thank you so much. I'll leave-- Kate and Lenny, if you don't mind just hanging on very briefly. But can we mind giving them a round of applause? And you can either take off your mics or just give a

[CLAPS]

Thank you very much.

[LAUGHS]

Thank you very much, everyone. I'm glad you enjoyed today's session. And again, we're all very grateful for you Kate and Lenny.