



I was 12 when Martin Luther King Jr gave his “I Have a Dream” speech and President John F Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Both men had inspired me to be interested in politics and in the civil rights movement. At 17 years of age I was devastated when Dr King and Robert F Kennedy were killed. In the 5 years between the murders, I had followed the battle for civil rights in America and naively believed that racism was a problem for the USA and countries like South Africa, but that the UK was doing much better. I was at school in London and my classmates were a diverse group, and I thought nothing of it. However, in 1968 not only did we have the horrific murders of King and Kennedy, but we also had the Rivers of Blood speech by Enoch Powell. I remember that the dockers marched in support of Powell, and it shook me out of complacency and opened my eyes to the racism in this country. I worked for ten years in the NHS and multi-cultural teams were the norm, but my friends and colleagues shared some of the racist abuse that they experienced on a daily basis.

When I became a teacher, my first two schools were mainly white – one consisting of children from working class families and the other with a majority of middle class families. My next job as a Deputy Head was in Slough and over 70% of the school population were from an Asian background. I learnt much about the different religions and cultures, and the challenges the young people faced. My headship was in Lincolnshire and my school was 99% white. I went on a basketball trip to Leicester during Diwali and was appalled by the comments made by the students – they did not mean to be racist, but their comments were dreadful. I knew then that we had to work very hard with the students on multi-cultural education. Ignorance must not be an excuse for racism.

The events of this year have sadly confirmed that we are a long way from achieving King’s dream. I want to see equality, social justice, and a society where diversity is valued. In 1963, Dr King said “ This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilising drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.” As Nelson Mandela said: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world...”This is why SSAT is joining with Fig Tree International to launch the Race Charter Mark – we want to work with schools to change the world.

Sue Williamson
CEO SSAT the schools, students and teachers network