

## Leading as an ally in anti-racist Wales

Published by Dave Goodger, Chief Executive Officer, Early Years Wales

Any position of leadership bestows a level of privilege upon a person. Along with privilege comes accountability and a sense of civic responsibility which extends beyond the job role earned and is interwoven with the values and principles you live by.



When I started my role as Chief Executive Officer of Early Years Wales, in March 2020, I had just fifteen days before the pandemic closed the sector, schools, and our offices. In an unprecedented time of uncertainty, the only stable guiding pathway was to remain true to my own values and principles, be authentic, and lead my team with integrity.

My privileges are numerous, as a white, educated, male, I am aware the way society responds to me and treats me is different to many people I grew up associated with, people I am friends with, and colleagues I have and currently work with. When I understood the privileges my new role provided in more detail, I knew my responsibility was to lead my organisation to do better. We were evidently non-racist, but definitely not anti-racist at that time. In truth, I am not certain I was either, but knew I had to be anti-racist in value, word, and action. I wanted to use our collective position as an organisation in the childcare and early years sector to be the strong allies in support of an anti-racist Wales. I did not want to wait to hear the outcomes of reviews, working groups seated in 2020, or seek permissions; I wanted to use our collective energy, resources, and drive to lead and contribute to an anti-racist Wales from 2020, not in readiness for 2030.

However much I felt I was already informed, I knew I had to know more, do better and understand much more to even begin to consider myself racially literate.

Do the best you can  
until you know  
better. Then, when you  
know better, do better.”  
Maya Angelou

I was blessed. In my quest to reflect and learn, I met Liz Pemberton, The Black Nursery Manager, through a mutual contact from my network from a previous job role. Liz’s influence, her powerful and enlightening conversations, and her guidance and support provided a springboard to learning, reading, listening, and deepening my own thinking. It is as a result of Liz, I met Chantelle Haughton, Rachel Clarke, Laura Henry-Allain MBE, Dr Sue Davis, Aisha Thomas and many more; and every person and conversation has helped me learn, reflect, develop, and understand experiences that I do not encounter in my lived experience. We could not have provided any of the learning experiences or made any progress without the support of these leaders in education. It was through Liz’s initial signposting I read more widely than Akala and Benjamin Zephaniah (both excellent authors by the way) and expanded my own reflections, reading, and learning.

Liz’s initial work with our staff team in Early Years Wales, and a continued dialogue of the work we all needed to do has enabled us to work in allyship to the global majority. No one person is going to make the systemic and societal change that we need to realise an aspiration of being an anti-racist Wales; and let’s make no mistake, we are not there yet and far more will have to be done. As I write this in 2024, there are too many narratives of racism; systems that need to be dismantled and reconstructed; and individuals for whom a glass-ceiling would be far less problematic than the structural barriers they are currently forced to overcome. Therefore, empowering and supporting my team, regardless of role or seniority, to deepen their knowledge has been central to my leadership policy. I have paid for books, authorised conference attendances, and TEDTalk visits, continued to invest in seminal speakers willing to lead the anti-racist learning journey, and promoted authors, poets, and creative professionals allowing my staff to ‘know better’. I have ensured regular internal training from a range of providers (see appendix) and kept anti-racism as a core part of our membership offer and our internal development plan.

With and for our membership, and wider stakeholders, we have collaborated to train, upskill, and inform as many people as we can. In every learning session, we have placed a leader from our organisation on the training, joining the leaders of this training and demonstrating our allyship in every way we can, from promotion, to providing opportunities, to challenging biases and facing down difficult conversations from ill-informed national media outlets. With the full support of the staff team, we have ensured there is no single ‘anti-racist training’ but an anti-racist Wales journey that we all continue to support as a destination we need to arrive at together.

Understanding the evidence that children are able to visually identify differences from very early years, we need to ensure that the context in which they grow, develop, and the society structures they experience, such as childcare providers and health care providers to name just two they might meet in their early years, are robustly promoting the values of anti-racism. We need to use every lever and mechanism to influence and disrupt any negative stereotypes, biases, or worse that society and adults currently permit.

Rachel Clarke is quoted as saying, '**racism is the water, not the shark. If we want to do better, we have to fix our entire culture and systems, not just people.**' I agree. And as a leader, who is tuned in to neuroscience, I cannot miss Daniel Levitin's assertion that empathy is a declining skill in modern society<sup>1</sup>. If this is true, racism is the water, **and** the tide is running against us. We must resolutely continue to listen to the voices of those affected by racism, to hear their words, to improve our knowledge and understanding to be reliable and consistent allies. We must use all the evidence-based actions we can in order to contribute to the anti-racist Wales we want to live in, work in, and experience in Wales.

I have committed to personal, organisational, and collective actions to respond to the anti-racist Wales Action Plan. As you read this, at whatever level of leadership from senior leader to individual practitioner what will you do to provide your allyship to the anti-racist Wales journey? Your contribution might dwarf mine, or like mine, create a ripple that supports reflection, engagement, learning and action in those around you. Together we are stronger, and I would encourage you to use your permissions, invest your time in reflection and learning and make your own contribution.

***"The beauty of anti-racism is that you don't have to pretend to be free of racism to be anti-racist. Anti-racism is the commitment to fight racism wherever you find it, including in yourself. And it's the only way forward." – Ijoema Oluo***

In sharing this journey, I do not seek to be indulgent; this is my personal journey as one leader in a pool of many. I will let history judge my performance, my leadership, my integrity, my actions, and the actions and responses of the organisation I lead. I hope my learning, my ownership of my mistakes, and my continued presence and action to learn myself, prompt others to learn, and do better can inspire other leaders to step forward and lead in their own unique and inspirational way.

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<sup>1</sup> The Organized Mind pg.131 – Daniel Levitin

## **Appendix of credits**

Liz Pemberton, The Black Nursery Manager, <https://www.theblacknurserymanager.com/>

Rachel Clarke, Apex Educate, <https://www.apex-educate.co.uk/>

Chantelle Haughton DARPL, <https://darpl.org/>

Dr Susan Davis, (available through DARPL), <https://darpl.org/>

Laura Henry-Allain MBE, <https://www.laurahenryallain.com/about/>

Aisha Thomas, Representation Matters, <https://www.repmatters.co.uk/about-our-founder>

Sunil Patel and Sean Wharton, No Boundaries, <https://www.noboundaries.org.uk/>

*There are many more who have shared their time in informal spaces, through conversations, and through personal connections that have contributed to helping me understand their own experiences. These would be too numerous to name, and out of context in a public paper; you know who you are and that your friendship, support, and our shared connections are valued immensely. Thank you.*