

We speak to **Liz Pemberton**, Director of The Black Nursery Manager Training and Consultancy, about anti-racism in early years.

It was a natural move for Liz Pemberton to become a nursery manager. Her mother opened her first day nursery, in Birmingham, in the late 1980s and a second in the early 90s.

After almost two decades of managing the second site, Liz reassessed her career following world-changing events. “The BLM uprising forced some of us to confront the reality of police brutality and the murder of Black men, not just in

EXPANDING the conversation

the US but globally. The impact of gendered racism could be brought into the UK context – particularly when we think about fatherhood, mental health services and education,” she says.

Reflecting on the issues that had driven her career so far, Liz considered what steps she could take to “expand the conversation around social inequity, racism and specifically anti-Black racism”.

“I thought about what I could do to ensure people have a deeper understanding of those issues within an early years context. Children under 5 are massively impacted by judgements about their families, their capabilities, their capacity and their understanding of self,” Liz says.

“So I decided to pivot and look at what anti-racist education looks like in an early years context. It was important to me to clarify understanding in the sector and not conflate words like ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘multiculturalism’ with anti-racism, and to share with a wider audience some of the approaches I had embedded in my own early years practice.”



Looking inward

With that, the Black Nursery Manager Training and Consultancy was born, with the goal of challenging those working in early years to really focus on how race, culture and ethnicity should be understood and acknowledged.

“It’s first of all about having the conversation with yourself. A lot of this is introspective and requires work that is not performative. Much of the virtue-signalling that we saw, particularly in 2020 was about how good somebody was for celebrating Diwali or Eid or Lunar New Year. These were very tokenistic things. None of the work involved the educators themselves looking at who they were.”

The first thing Liz teaches early years practitioners in her training is to move away from thinking about resources as a starting point.

“You need to be thinking about who the educators are, what biases they hold, and how they are addressing it. We have to accept that, as humans, we all have biases, and we all internalise that. Once we accept it can we move on to thinking about how many Black dolls we have or books with characters from the Global Majority,” Liz says.

“Then be aware of your local environment. I’m in Birmingham, but there are early years settings that are based in the most rural white spaces in the UK. When we are talking about anti-racist practice, the get-out is usually: ‘Well, everybody is white here, so we don’t need to have the conversation.’ I always say that is actually the perfect environment to start doing the work.

“You don’t need somebody who isn’t white in order to do anti-racist work. If you are part of the



FAST FACTS

Q What would people be surprised to learn about you?

A I can play the double bass.

Q What do you like to do in your spare time?

A I really enjoy dancing, especially in social environments, and I enjoy being in company generally.

Q What's your proudest moment so far?

A Giving birth to my son in very traumatic circumstances.

Q If you were to describe yourself in three words, what would they be?

A Gregarious, generous and passionate.

The FOUR Es

“I devised the ‘four Es’ of anti-racist practice,” Liz explains. They are:

- 1 Embrace** all children’s racial, cultural and religious backgrounds.
- 2 Ensure** that practice is culturally sensitive and that the child is positioned as the expert of their own identity.
- 3 Embed** a culture of belonging and value among practitioners and children.
- 4 Extend** learning opportunities for the child by showing interest and expanding conversations.

Global Majority, it isn’t your job to solve racism; it’s not something that we, as people with other racialised identities, have created. So, I always encourage early years educators to do the work, wherever they are.”

Necessary discomfort

The reaction to Liz’s work, she says, ranges from guilt and shock to disbelief and disengagement, to an enthusiasm to become the best.

“Some people see it as an ‘anti-racist competition’ and want to get to the end of it first. They don’t really understand that this work is longitudinal, and it impacts not just your professional but your personal life.

“The wider conversation about race has already stagnated and is not progressive in this country; it is couched as being

difficult or impolite to talk about race and racism. Although it can be uncomfortable, we need to be in discomfort in order to change, and one of the first things is to think about the power of our language.”

There are positive signs on the horizon, though, and Liz believes the emerging generations of new early years educators offer reasons to be hopeful.

“Everybody’s early childhood experiences and schooling impacts how they see and process the world, and early years educators have to recognise the part they can play in dismantling injustice. I want all children to see themselves as limitless and have a vision for themselves and a passion that makes them excited and happy. Anything is possible.” 