

PEOPLE'S NEWSROOM

YOUNG, BLACK AND WELSH

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There is still a perception that Welsh is an inherently “white” language and in turn Wales is an inherently white country

Despite completing 15 years of Welsh medium education, despite being born and raised in Swansea and despite speaking fluent Welsh, I usually receive a shocked reaction when I speak the language. And despite attempts to dismiss these experiences, I have become painfully aware of how I am seen, or more accurately not seen as a Black, Welsh speaking person.

Attending a 98% white school and facing almost daily torment ranging from smaller micro aggressions, such as touching my hair, to harsh and overt racism, such as racial slurs, meant I never felt truly accepted within the Welsh community. One of my earliest memories was having my skin colour compared to poo and mud at the age of five. Little did I know that this was only the beginning, shaping the idea that I will never be ‘Welsh’ enough simply because of the colour of my skin. This caused a strange confusion for me growing up as a mixed Welsh-Nigerian person. The dichotomy of looking “more Black” yet having a better understanding of my Welsh over Nigerian heritage has left me feeling isolated at times.

In my experience the lack of diversity within Welsh language schools combined with a curriculum that prioritises the needs of its white students has damaging effects on its few Black students. My conversation with Professor Charlotte Williams, chair of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities, Contributions and Cynefin in the New Curriculum Working Group, only reinforced this. She said that failure in representing the history of BAME people directly leads to reduced academic attainment in these groups. This reduced academic attainment, due to lower self-esteem and interest, perpetuates other forms of oppression, such as classism which affects the most vulnerable members of society. Her work in changing the curriculum, beginning in 2020, has meant that children across Wales are being given access to the entirety of our country's rich history. Failure to include BAME history also affects white children's attainment as she stated: “The majority white child being denied to have their curriculum, their thinking, enriched by diversity”.

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This reduction in attainment and opportunity is perhaps best represented by my 16-year old sister's experience. Growing up, she was passionate about history, and decided to take it as one of her GCSE options, yet she eventually dropped the subject due to the inappropriate trivialisation of Black history in her teaching. Yet this is only a small example of the frequent racism she faced. Her hair is now damaged from daily straightening due to pupils mocking its texture. She has suffered significant mental health effects from years of racial abuse. This eventually forced her to leave her Welsh language secondary and head to an English college. She implied that the solution is multi-layered but a key part lies within changing curriculum and educating students. She also highlighted the thin line between patriotism and racism stating: “They're very proud of being Welsh but then that pride can turn into hatred for anyone that isn't Welsh”.

This occasionally misguided “patriotism” may stem from Wales' own position as a formerly oppressed nation. Perhaps the most notable example that permeates our history is

Tryweryn, the Welsh village infamously and purposefully drowned to supply Liverpool with water in 1965 despite push back from Welsh locals and government.

Yet there is a strange hypocrisy: the Welsh themselves have been oppressed, yet Welsh language institutions continue to reinforce this attitude towards ethnic minority groups who arguably face more severe, racialised discrimination. Despite the fact that black Welsh speakers have been documented as back as the 18th century and perhaps earlier, there is still a perception that Welsh is an inherently “white” language and in turn Wales is an inherently white country. This issue is systemic and embedded within the education system, our media and cultural events. This is evidenced by a lack of prominent Black Welsh role models. The Education Workforce Council found that currently only 7 of a total of 3,443 serving headteachers/executive headteachers are from minority ethnic backgrounds, none of which are Black.

Yet there is some evidence of change. Following the Black Lives Matter movement in 2021, S4C, the national Welsh language television channel announced a commitment to increase the amount of BAME backgrounds on screen. Additionally, the number of ethnic minority teachers is growing annually.

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So what are the implications for the current generation and those to come? The Arts Council of Wales and Amgueddfa Cymru commissioned The Arts Anti-Racist Union look into their inclusion efforts. Unsurprisingly they found that both organisations hadn't done enough to engage with people from ethnic minority backgrounds. They cited current Welsh language policies in the organisations' applications processes as part of the problem. Of course, it's difficult to argue that the language itself is racist, but the current environment of Welsh language spaces certainly contributes to the lack of Welsh speakers from these backgrounds. Nia Adere, a 20 year old student who attended Welsh Language schools in Swansea said her former schools are becoming more diverse annually. She spoke of her younger sister, age 10, who has more ethnic minority pupils in her year in comparison to her own, which contributes to a more welcoming environment. This is reflected by the wider trend across all schools in Wales with 12% of students over 5 being from ethnic minority backgrounds. Despite this her sister still continues to face racism, showing that increased diversity alone, without acknowledging Black history is simply not enough.

This also brings discussion about the future of Welsh culture, as our world is rapidly becoming more multicultural, more multilingual and will be even more so in 2052. Traditional Welsh culture can be preserved without denying a safe space for its ethnic minority members. For example, Tiger Bay in Cardiff, which houses Somali communities, was one of the first places Black people lived in the UK, and so failure to include these stories means that Welsh history is simply incomplete.

I asked Charlotte about the inclusion of the word ‘Cynefin’ in the title of the New Curriculum Working Group, which seems to contradict the narrative that the Welsh language is exclusionary. She said ‘cynefin’ which means habitat in Welsh is an idea that can be “challenged as well as subscribed to”. That it is not exclusive to those who are ethnically Welsh but instead encompasses the full history of Wales, which includes its Black members. This shines a light on a future with a curriculum which represents a better, more inclusive Wales.

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