

Section 1

According to Wilde, (2018) the dictionary defines a leader as someone who commands a group or organisation. This is not a true description of a great leader. Catalytic leaders inspire others, they identify problems and find solutions and effective ways of helping and supporting others. McDowall Clark, (2012) describes catalytic leadership as those who approach leadership with an inclusive social context. Furthermore Cooper, (2014) tells us the importance of recognising and engaging in leadership as part of everyday practice. This is seen as important when working within the Early Years.

Previously leadership was seen as structured hierarchal type of leadership with shared responsibilities. In the early years successful leadership is described as someone who understands how children best learn and develop and make this happen (Sullivan, 2010) Leadership has developed overtime in strength and complexity. Practitioners' roles have grown over the years, and it is not just simply to look out for a child's development and education anymore. Although early years still have a manager and assistant manager of setting overseeing the provision, all staff are taking on leadership roles working with children, families, and other professionals. Nicholson et al, (2018) states that although there have been many reasons which have caused this need for change, leadership involves influencing others towards change. Ella Baker had a catalytic leader approach even so many years ago. Parker, (2020) described this approach as those who have great communication practice within the community. The Catalytic leadership approach benefits social justice, and these leaders work alongside people in vulnerable communities to create positive social change.

In the Early Years practitioners have become catalytic leaders, not only care for children they also make plans to support children's development. They are often the first point of communication with parents as well as the first listening ear to them getting advice and support. Early years practitioners work with other agencies and professionals to identify issues and signpost children and families for help and support. Families have been impacted by crime, mental health, covid, cost of living crisis, poverty, and many other sociological factors. Although many jobs still have their titles and responsibilities of reporting to someone else leadership is under theorised.

There are many sociological factors that practitioners face when working with children and families. It is no longer just managing a setting, practitioners now have the importance of working with others with effective communication, understanding and empathy to think about others as a duty of care to enable the best outcomes for the children and families. They are also required to be knowledgeable about the families in their community and the services that are available to support them making changes.

There are many challenges to this. There has been a shift of qualities and characteristics of leadership according to Campbell-Barr, (2016). Previously managers were the first point of contact. The communication all going to them firstly with them having all the power and responsibility. Heikka and Waniganayke, (2011) state that there was an important change from the traditional model of leadership and more than administrators to support practitioners working with children and families. Although this was a positive change it is still apparent that the manager still has the power for the decision making and can stop practitioners from being catalytic leaders. There is now increased expectations on settings, providing childcare for working families and providing high quality play-based environment for learning and development. Early years are still regarded as low-level, low paid and undervalued this could lead to practitioners just doing the basics and not thriving to create catalytic change. A catalytic leadership is required to be non-judgemental to others and situations, to care to make changes for helping others. Early years practitioners see children and families daily and more than the professionals who are paid better to look out for these families. There is often a waiting list to services and funding and although a practitioner can refer and find help for the families sometimes, they can only do so much within their position of power. It can feel frustrating for the practitioner who has the knowledge but is not the decision maker, they see families struggling but can only do so much for them. This could be damaging to the practitioners work ethos when they try to help but feel sometimes it is pointless.

There may be differences in opinions and staff below managers may feel they are not able to challenge the views above them and therefore not able to be catalytic. Baker, (1980) tell us that 'Strong people do not need strong leaders' and wisdom often comes from the people at the bottom to help make changes. The manager may just wish to do just their job and not add to their workload, there can be a difference in approach to goals. Garvey, (2017) states that conflict is normal within an employment relationship, however a certain degree of conflict can be positive as it creates innovation between practitioners. If conflict remains unresolved it can lead to resentment and escalate. (CIPD, 2016). This is also confirmed in research By Dyer, (2018) which has shown that although practitioners want to help families further, they sometimes feel they are unable to challenge practitioners above them in the hierarchal structure. Furthermore, even though it would significantly enhance a child's development and wellbeing, practitioners feel powerless despite expertise and experience to effect change.

A great catalytic leader possesses skills to inspire others, to create change. A great leader is known as a change agent (Hadfield, Jopling and Needham, 2015). Continued professional development is an important part of early years. It allows all practitioners to keep updates with research and practice and is vital that everyone attends not just the manager or leader. It has been found that when practitioners feel undervalued, they perform poorly. A catalytic leader therefore ensures everyone feels valued, respected, and listened to. Training can be offered to staff but often in their own unpaid time. If it were to take place in work hours, it would affect staffing and have a budgetary impact providing staff to take their place.

Catalytic leadership is everyone's responsibility and as important in the early years as safeguarding children and families. It does not come from above or Infront but everywhere (Reed and Canning, 2012). Leaders play a key role in early years practice and there is now training for everyone in the early years. There is now advanced training in early childhood pedagogy and leadership, even when not in formal leadership roles. (Sims, et al. 2015). This is vital for practitioners to learn the importance of theory behind job roles as research has shown that practitioners were unaware of this when questioned about their roles. (Dyer, 2018). This is an important development for the Early years Siraj-Blatchford and Mani, (2007) state that qualifications and experience of leaders make the difference of high-quality settings for children.

Catalytic leadership is powerful enough to speed up the rate of reaction. (Eckbert, 2022). Early years practitioners regular contact with children and families. They often notice

changes or identify when families may need further support or referral to intervention agencies. Here they are catalytic leaders as they contact outside agencies which speeds up the rate of help and often prevention of anything escalating further, leading to better outcomes for the children and families. Early years practitioners are also part of sustainable catalytic leadership, they work together with others, so the workload is shared. Part of the early years is working with other professionals. Practitioners are in contact with health visitors, speech and language teams and social services and other agencies to share information which benefits the individual job role as expertise and responsibility is shared therefore accelerates work and practice.

Although this is a positive for children and families sometimes there are huge waiting lists for support or information is shared and nothing is followed up.

Dyer, (2018) states there are many challenges for Early Years Practitioners in meeting the demands of sociological factors. Practitioners have many roles, not only to improve health and educational outcomes they also must monitor wellbeing and have the specialist knowledge about interventions if needed, as well as a good relationship with parents to communicate this with them. A practitioner will come across poverty which will come in many forms. It can happen due to a lack of income, unemployment, limited access, or knowledge about services available to them, as well as social discrimination cultural differences, equality, and social inclusion (United Nations, date unknown). Early years practitioners are now working with many children and families who face these issues and have no part in decision making. A practitioner is required to think for others and empower them to make positive changes. Catalyst leaders inspire others and allow them to grow it is not about themselves. (Anderton, 2017).

Practitioners have a huge difficulty trying to change poverty. O'Sullivan, (2023) tell us that poverty is growing and 1 in 4 children are experiencing it with 50 % of those being children under 5. Wilson and Paull, (2020) state that although children's life chances are restricted in poverty, Early Childhood Education and Care and high-quality provision can help break cycles. It can provide parents with opportunities to work with childcare as well as play opportunities which are vital to children's social and emotional development. Early years settings have health eating snack policies which promotes healthy foods to children and families, but this is only a benefit for the children when they are at setting. They also promote toothbrushing after snack which is only beneficial for the few hours the children spend in setting and it does not account for the most hours the children spend at home in the care of the parents.

To conclude Catalytic leadership is already happening in the Early Years, with many practitioners working with others to support children and families. They empower others to make positive changes to their lives for better outcomes. Lots of services and support are available to families. Therefore, it really depends on great leadership skills to go beyond job roles to make a difference and help others. A great leader in the Early Years can only keep advocating for children and hope that positive messages are taken on board by the parents. You cannot measure catalytic leadership there are barriers of performativity, lack of confidence, power, motivation, time, and resources. Early years leaders are change agents as they support children and families daily providing encouragement, knowledge and sign posting them to help for better outcomes.

Section 2

The Children's Commissioner for Wales began in 2001. Chosen by children, it came about to listen to views, advocate rights and safeguard children (Children's Commissioner for Wales Act, 2001) Rocio Cifuentes is the present Commissioner for Wales. When talking to SYDIC, (2022) Rocio stated her role is to look how decisions are made by public bodies such as the Welsh Government affect children's rights. The commissioner also has a duty to influence others to make a difference to children's rights regarding the United Nations Convention Rights of the Child.

Appointed in April 2022, the role is important to shape the future for a generation of children. (Welsh Government, 2022a). The commissioner holds the Welsh Government to account for any action it makes therefore promoting and protecting children's rights. Most recently the commissioner called for the Welsh Government to devise an action plan to tackle, child poverty and support children and families with impact of poverty.

The role of commissioner is to uphold responsibilities to enable better outcomes for children in Wales. Acting as a voice for children and informs decision making which is needed with poverty, covid and the cost-of-living crisis in Wales. According to Children in Wales, (2021) 34 % of children are living in poverty. Even before covid there were 3 in 10 children effected and poverty can have a long-lasting impact on children's outcomes affecting education health and overall wellbeing. The commissioner was right to call on this action as there was a crisis with poverty in Wales before the added impact of Covid 19. According to Matejic, (2020) Wales has the lowest pay in the United Kingdom. This impacts family incomes and then the children within the household. The importance of the early times in child's life cannot be underestimated with evidence which can shape that children's outcomes into adulthood. The Delphi study found that during and after covid children had more disrupted starts, transitions and had been impacted in all areas of development. The study highlighted that the previous approaches of child poverty needed to change to get better outcomes for children. (Welsh Government 2021, p 63 and p 64).

The commissioners for Wales produce a three-year plan identifying what will improve children's lives in Wales They aim to work together to give children and young people the right mental health support. To be able to grow up happy and healthy and ensuring all public organisations in Wales prioritise children's rights when designing and delivering services. Furthermore, they have pushed for children to learn about their right in schools. Childrens Commissioner for Wales (date unknown) This is a positive change for children as it will give them the knowledge and empower them to stand up for themselves.

Mental health was identified by Rocio as a great concern from research undertaken for the three-year plan. The commissioner has a team of 23 to support her work and they include investigations and advice for children. (Childrens Commissioner for Wales, 2019).

The post is equivalent to the children's ombudsman in other countries and was established after a decade of campaigning by children's organisations in Wales. The first commissioner was appointed after the Waterhouse Report. The report uncovered years of abuse in North Wales children's homes, homes that children were meant to feel safe and protected. Peter Clark was appointed in 2001 and he presented changes after reviewing social services departments and produced guides on whistleblowing, children's advocacy, and complaints. All these are vital in the protection of children in Wales today. (Philpot, 2007). During the years of abuse allegations were made but no further action was taken. This was the biggest abuse scandal of all time and began in 1986 and so many children could have been saved if we had the procedures, we have in place for safeguarding children today.

Keith Towler appointed in 2008 was the second commissioner for Wales, He believed physical punishment was ineffective and that it could cause more physical and emotional harm. He called for changes in the law to stop parents smacking children and advocated for children to have the same protection as adults and animals He campaigned for a change in legislation to help shift attitudes and behaviours (BBC News, 2011). The second commissioner also had a focus on poverty and advocated access to sport to help keep children happy, healthy, and motivated. He enlisted the help of positive role models for children such as sports personalities and ran a scheme called Raise your game. (BBC, 2014).

Sally Holland was the third in 2015. A registered social worker, she continued the campaign on a ban for smacking. This lasted more than two decades, and the law was passed finally in 2022 joining 60 other nations to ban physical punishment of children. BBC News, (2015) reported that this law was a historic moment for children and their rights in Wales. Morris, (2022) states that it encourages everyone to look out for and report on the welfare of children. Physical punishment has been proven to be not effective and creating further behavioural difficulties. (Welsh Government, 2022b). This law was passed in Sweden in 1979, although it is a great outcome for the children of Wales its detrimental that it has taken so long to become law.

The commissioner campaigned for better mental health services for children and called for new residential provision which supports both social and mental health. Through research she found children were having to travel to access help and often sent to the wrong places therefore adding to the stress of children's mental health and wellbeing. It was found resources in Wales was lacking when it came to mental health and often does not meet the needs of individuals. She actioned for support to be received quicker and supported the new curriculum for children in Wales which has more focus on mental health and wellbeing. (Mental Health Wales, date unknown).

The 'No Wrong Door' report identifies how many children and families are let down by the services in Wales and professionals whose duty it is to protect and support them. The report highlights how many children and families seek help but are often passed from one service to another. Many also find themselves on a long waiting list and shockingly get to the top of the list only to be told they are on the wrong list for the wrong help and support.

The commissioner filed this report believing services should be easier available to families. Regardless of the individual specifications, help should be available. Therefore, the response is based on a need, not a diagnosis. The report clearly shows children are not having their rights met in line with United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2019)

The report recommends that the Welsh Government need to make the mental health and social care of children and young people a clear priority for the future. The process of children and families receiving vital help and support needs to become faster to be more effective to allow for intervention and prevention of future problems. It has been identified that waiting lists are long with no support available whilst waiting. Children in Wales are experiencing distress with mental health, emotional, wellbeing and behavioural difficulties. Additionally affecting families who do not feel supported or listened to. (Childrens Commissioner for Wales, date unknown).

Children are not receiving the appropriate care and found to be turned away from services as if they were someone else's problem. It was also shown that there were many children who were 'Missing in the Middle' the children who do not meet the threshold for specialist services and CAMHS but require therapeutic and other interventions. Smith, (2021) reporting for Wales online states that waiting list for professional mental services are as long as 9 months. A specialist in this area added that the waiting to be assessed can cause additional stress which also raises levels of risk. According to The Childrens Society, (2022) Mental health in young people and children has increased by 50% in the last 3 years. Worryingly now 5 children in a classroom are likely to have a mental health issue and 66% of families could not access help when they needed it. Since the No door report has been released sadly the need is now greater.

Welsh Government, (2023) state in their statistics and research the waiting time is up to 4 weeks. This is still problematic for children and families; anything could happen in this time problems could worsen and reach crisis point. Early intervention and prevention are crucial for reducing the waiting list. Early help and support could help with the long waiting of specialist services. The report recommends advocating the No wrong door report with Gps, Schools and Social services. This could have a positive effect on support for families and children. If more professionals are aware of the issues in the report and the huge demand on specialist services, they can sign post families to other services first. (Welsh Government, 2022c). The report found that children are having to spend time on adult wards and there are no dedicated mental health children's units in Wales. The adult units would be adding to their trauma and not suitable to their age or needs. The only answer for this would be for the government to make funding for this a top priority in Wales as mental health is the most common issue raised with the commissioner. (Childrens Commissioner for Wales, 2021). The barrier to this would be staffing, who is trained and continued funding to run the service.

Another issue was transitions from children to adult services, with children not feeling prepared. Positive planned transitions are vital throughout children lives. They are respected within the early years when it comes to transitioning from nursery and school so it should have the same importance in health services. One of the recommendations of the report was

to encourage a whole school approach. Welsh Government, (2021) believes this will make a difference to children as the effects of inaction and delay can have a long-term impact on children. Schools work with children regularly and will have better understanding and relationships with them and their families. There are many reports of limited options for children who do not meet the threshold of specialist services. If the school is supporting children with their wellbeing and mental health this can have a positive impact on the services and their waiting lists. Evidence shows that with appropriate interventions, support children can live happily and healthily if intervening in a timely and targeted way. (National Assembly for Wales 2018)

Section 3.

Poverty is one of the biggest Sociological factors that challenges children's lives and experiences. There are 3.9 million children living in poverty in the United Kingdom and the highest being 34% of children in Wales (Action for Children, 2022). Poverty can impact life chances. One of those being an impact on education, children may have in appropriate clothing due to family income which causes self-esteem issues or bullying. They could also be hungry due to lack of substantial healthy food which impacts learning and the ability to concentrate in school. Children may also miss education due to travel costs depending on where they live. Poverty can limit a child's

access to after school clubs or outside sports activities if parents cannot afford them which will impact their overall health and wellbeing. (Children in Wales, date unknown).

It has been found that children who live in poverty have a higher odd to experiencing poor health problems. Poverty impacts how the body and mind develop and can alter the fundamental structure of the brain through experiences and attachments with others. Through poor diet and limited access to exercise children have higher odds of developing one of many health problems later in life such as heart disease, stroke, obesity as well as having a shorter life expectancy.

The Commissioner for Wales, (2022) has warned the government of Poverty's devastating impact on children's rights. They include Article 6 Life survival and development; the government must do all they can to ensure children survive and develop their full potential.

Article 19 Protection from Violence, Abuse, and neglect, poverty can be a factor causing some of these issues. Article 24 Every child has the right to best health. Article 26 Social security, the government must provide support to families who need it. Article 27 Every child has the right to physical and social needs and support families who cannot afford this. Article 28 The right to education.

The Welsh Government has introduced lots of initiatives to try and help families experiencing poverty in Wales. One of these is Free school dinners. Originally it was means tested but from April 2023 they are offering it to more children in primary school in reception, years 1 and years 2. Whilst this is great for children who qualify there are many others who miss out. Welsh Government (2022) state that younger children are more likely to live in income poverty but Child Poverty Action group (2021) claim so many other children miss out and recommends universal free school dinner for all ages.

Some councils offer a uniform grant for families to access financial help towards buying school uniform which can be expensive and another worry to families. While this may be a help to the families who qualify, it is another means tested initiative and only families who claim certain benefits can apply. This does not help the proportion of families who are also living in poverty but have someone working in their home. Inman, (2020) for The Guardian reported that 7 in 10 children classed as living in poverty are living in a household with one family member working and those are not entitled to the grant.

Early intervention programmes were put in place to support children and families living in poverty. They aim to support families through targeted early intervention and support to prevent the need escalating or needing of specialist services and statutory support. One of these programmes is Flying Start. (Welsh Government, 2017).

Launched in 2006/7 to make a difference to life's chances of children and to have better outcomes for families. Families and children within a certain area are offered a place with a high-quality setting childcare setting with a high-quality environment which evidence has shown led to high quality experiences for children. The families also have an enhanced health visitor service, support from Speech Language and Communication Team and access to several parent support services. The Welsh government have found there is considerable evidence showing that parental engagement and good at home parenting has a positive impact on learning and outcomes.

Flying start has a multidisciplinary approach for all health visitors professionals and services working with the families to collaborate to meet the needs of the family. The childcare setting develops close links with these professionals and agencies to support the children and their families. Flying Start is due to be rolled out to all children in Wales.

While this is great for children to access high quality childcare and provision. Sadly, due to funding the other areas will only have access to the childcare element and not the other services available. Therefore, will cause confusion for families and professionals. (Welsh Government, 2022d) There are already issues with the recruitment of childcare staff. Even though quality Early Years provision has been found to have a positive impact on disadvantaged children and closing the gap of attainment and their peers, staff are choosing to leave the sector because of the poor pay. (BBC News, 2020) Many nurseries are also feeling the hit of covid and the cost of living on providing services therefore there maybe issues trying to implement this. (Summers, 2022)

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