

Inclusive leadership: working together to support families

Section 1

What is an inclusive leader and why is inclusive leadership important?

Organisations on small, large and international levels have leaders, however, a clear definition of what a leader is can be vague as terms such as leadership, leader and leading can all be interchanged and may have different expectations and understanding of the role depending on the individual (Siraj and Hallet, 2013). There are many styles of leadership, one of which being inclusive leadership, the definition of which, looks at different attributes, skills and knowledge that a leader holds or aims to achieve, for example, looking at theories, research, practice and experience and applying that to the workplace to promote inclusivity within diverse teams and communities (Ferdman, Prime and Riggio, 2021). Within the early years, an inclusive leader should work to develop a shared vision of a setting including input from the child, family, practitioners and the wider community to ensure the needs of the unique child are met (Hallet, 2013). Inclusive leadership allows all stakeholders to have a say on how a setting is run and should ensure they everybody has a vested interest in providing the best experiences and outcomes for every child, however, although inclusion and inclusive practice is a focal point for many settings, how to achieve inclusivity is debateable (Ferdman, 2017).

Scenario

An extended family of Gypsies have moved into the local area and several children have been placed within the primary school. One child, Alicia, has struggled to settle and has hit several other children, leading to temporary exclusions. Alicia's parents are unwilling to engage with the school to discuss the situation. Several members of staff have been overheard complaining that Alicia's hours should be reduced or that she isn't ready to start full time education yet and parents have also been overheard discussing their grievances with the family in general including the siting of the families' caravans.

What can the inclusive leader do to ensure the child in the scenario is included and supported?

An inclusive leader should look at each child within their setting as unique, as suggested by the new curriculum in Wales, to understand how best to support them to develop to their full potential (Welsh Government, 2023). They should also consider the child in the context of the environment that surrounds them, as suggested by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model, to best understand how their environment shapes who they are based on the values and beliefs of their immediate family, those of their school and in the wider context of society up to governmental policy making level (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022).

An inclusive leader should put the child at the centre of any actions or decisions made with due regard for the voice of the child in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Articles 2, 3, 12 and 29 highlight the need for the voice of the child to be heard in all matters that affect them and being respectful of their opinions, doing what is in the best interests of the child and ensuring that education helps them develop their interests to their full potential. (United Nations Children's Fund, no date). Rosario *et al.* (2014) suggests that although Gypsy children may be marginalised in society through their limited education, some Gypsy children did not perceive education past learning basic literacy and numeracy skills as important to live their lives as Gypsies.

An inclusive leader should seek to gain more information regarding why the child has struggled to settle into the setting, has there been problems in the past or is this the child's first experience in an education setting? Attendance amongst Gypsy Traveller and Roma children varies (Welsh Government, 2023a). Johansson and Puroila (2021) suggest that a child should have a sense of belonging within a setting, where they have agency over their environment and feel valued with an active role to play in that community. This is supported by Bowlby's attachment theory that when a child feels secure in their environment, they are able to explore and play freely (Holmes, 2014), similarly, the new curriculum in Wales places emphasis on the enabling adult in supporting and developing a child's understanding of their environment through experiential play (Welsh Government, 2023b and Early Years Wales, 2020), however, this requires highly trained practitioners who understand the theory and importance of the role of the adult within the early years with clear links to good practice (Solvason & Webb, 2023). The independent stocktake of the foundation phase argued that quality of provision varies across Wales as there is a need for a complete change of philosophy for many practitioners with clear links demonstrated between theory and good practice (Welsh Government, 2014), the reality of how well the new curriculum will address this is yet to be fully realised.

To facilitate a more inclusive approach to overcoming the challenges in the scenario an inclusive leader should be self-aware, willing to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses and be able to recognise their own assumptions and stereotypes (Gerritsen, 2020). Dunajeva (2021) suggests that people see Gypsies as either good or bad, the good Gypsy stereotype being the colourful wagon and fortune tellers and the bad being antisocial behaviour, littering and criminality which can cause deep division and hostile feelings, whereas the reality is that many Gypsies have become more settled as the world has developed technologically and fewer true nomadic Gypsies remain, however, O'Sullivan (2015) argues that successful early years leaders are able to articulate their pedagogical philosophy, becoming the culture setter, embedding an inclusive approach at every level of a setting through being a good role model and reflecting continually on their own practices.

Ferdman (2021) suggests that inclusion should be viewed as a multi-layered system affecting the individual at the centre, in this Scenario, the child, and all leaders should understand how a child's immediate surrounding may influence their experiences; how groups, leaders, organisations and society may affect the outcomes for everyone. This links again to Bronfenbrenner's socioecological system with the child at the centre and the ability to see how different levels of the society that surround the child affects what they learn, how they learn and how they see the world around them and their place within it (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022).

The role of the early years leader in addressing the comments of practitioners may be a complex situation, for example, it may be due to lack of knowledge on how to support the child through the transition to school, stereotyping or a lack of willingness to engage with the child. Ferdman (2021) suggests that part of the role of an inclusive leader is to challenge the biases of others through having difficult conversations, they should challenge individuals, groups and societies and promote inclusive behaviours and become the driving force to ensure that inclusion becomes the norm.

Inclusive leaders should have the ability to listen to the views of the practitioners that surround the child to gain a better understanding of the circumstances unfolding as Alicia hits out, however, Gypsy children argue that they are excluded from friendship groups because of bias -based bullying and that they have been unfairly punished when the causes

of conflicts have not been fully understood, they have also complained that when they report racist behaviour towards them that they are not taken seriously or the accusation is not fully investigated (Deuchar and Bhopal, 2013).

The inclusive leader should consider whether there may be specific aspects of the school routine that causes upset for the child, for example, horizontal transitions throughout the sessions. The building of new friendships is a skill that the child may not have if they have not left the family circle before, the provision of extra support could be put into place to help the child build more positive relationships with other children. Is there a particular aspect of the day that causes distress or upset to the child? Or could there be the possibility of an additional learning need. It is likely to be a combination of reasons why the child hit out, so, the inclusive leader should be willing to make decisions on how adjustments can be made, in accordance with *the Equality Act 2010*, the *Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) 2018* and the schools inclusion policy to identify what early interventions may be helpful to ensure the best outcomes for the child.

The right to play is covered by article 31 of the UNCRC and states that a child has the right to rest, relax and play in an environment that is safe and that they should have agency over how they play, however, Bergin et al. 2023 suggests that Traveller children are at higher risk of not fully exercising their right to play due to several factors including bias-based bullying and a lack of appropriate opportunities and safe places for them to play where they live. The lack of appropriate space to play links with the homelessness issues within Wales and the lack of available, appropriate sites for Gypsy and Traveller people to access and utilise as they migrate (Neath Port Talbot Council, 2024). An inclusive leader should be mindful of the impact that homelessness or insecure housing may have on children. Radcliff *et al.* (2019) suggests that there are links between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as poor housing stability, and poor health outcomes later in life, conversely, Romero, Robertson and Watson (2018) argue that high quality early years experiences may allow children to overcome adverse childhood experiences.

The new curriculum in Wales suggests that schools should become hubs within the community, developing a vision of schools as learning organisations where all sections of society have a say on what is taught and how (Welsh Government, 2022), similarly, Scanlan and Johnson (2020) suggest that schools should be viewed as social frontiers where people from diverse backgrounds can come together to create a shared understanding of a school vision and that leaders should act as border crossers to ensure inclusivity for all, acting as advocates for minority or underrepresented groups through multi agency working with external stakeholders such as community leaders and unions, however, one study suggested that Gypsies were viewed as unattractive from a budgetary point of view as outreach, tailored and specialist services are required to support Traveller families (Mason and Broughton, 2007), similarly, Vizard and Obolenskaya (2023) argue that engagement exercises with Gypsy, Traveller and Roma groups needed specialist input, training and funding, which may not be readily available within schools.

An inclusive leader should strive to make the connections with the family and gain the knowledge needed through open dialogue to better understand the cultural beliefs and identity of the family and how best to incorporate them into the setting. Preemptive love (2021) suggests cultural appreciation over cultural appropriation, encouraging the child and the parents to become involved in the setting, encouraging suggestions on play opportunities, making connection on a positive footing, rather than engaging only when the child has hit out, allowing them to share and further develop the vision and ethos of the

setting with their own culture and beliefs woven into it. This idea is similar to the Te Whariki and the woven mat ethos of sharing ideas, beliefs and cultures from diverse backgrounds to ensure that every child understands the world they inhabit and encouraging them to celebrate that diversity (Ministry of Education, 1996).

The family's reluctance to engage with the school may come from their own poor experiences with education, however, one study has shown that despite Traveller parents having poor experiences themselves within education, through racist name calling and a lack of understanding from other about their cultural identity, they did recognise the importance and the possibilities available to their own children through education (Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020). Many Gypsies have chosen to settle as the modern world has evolved, however, there are Gypsy Travellers who lead a nomadic life where education, healthcare and security are a constant concern for them, Nguyen, Boreczky and Gordon (2019) suggest that parents from marginalised groups such as Gypsy Travellers believe that education is vital, however, due to discrimination and stigmatisation they can become confrontational, unwilling to engage with and withdraw from schools in order to protect their children.

Unfortunately, the Gypsy people are generally portrayed negatively in the media, for example, the Sun ran a campaign years ago to drive Gypsies out of the United Kingdom and recently there have been reports of mass littering after the annual Appleby Horse fair (Stavrou, 2024). The positives of the trade and income that events such as the Appleby Fair are not so well documented which builds on people's stereotyping of Gypsies on a national scale, however, Gypsy, Roma and some Traveller people have all been classed as a race and as such have protection under the *Equality Act 2010* and the *Race Relations Act 1976*, however, Gypsies have often complained of discrimination against them based on their race and people's uniformed, dated views on their lifestyle choices (Parliament.UK, 2019) and Gypsy children have reported that they are discriminated against and socially excluded on the basis of their race (Bloomer, Hamilton and Potter, 2014).

As with the lack of appropriate play spaces, Gypsies struggle to find suitable locations to settle when travelling, for example, is the family based at a suitable location within the Local authority? A person is deemed to be a homeless if their accommodation is mobile, but they have no place suitable for it to be sited (Welsh Government, 2021), Birmingham Civil and Family Justice Centre (2024) has ruled that aspects of the *Police Act 2022* is in breach of European Convention on Human Rights, namely the power of Police forces to enforce a 12 month ban on Gypsies from entering a given area and the power to seize Gypsy homes on roadside camps (Friends, Families & Travellers, 2024). An inclusive leader should be aware of the detrimental effects that issues such as lack of access to health care, stress and anxiety or homelessness can have on a person's wellbeing (Song *et al.* 2019).

The Welsh Government aims to address the level of homelessness in Wales and work collaboratively across several key stakeholders to ensure that homelessness is something that is prevented if possible and if a person experiences this, it is for a brief period and is not repeated (*Wellbeing of Future Generations Wales Act, 2015*). The European Commission (2023) have developed the Roma Platform, an engagement programme to encourage Roma, Gypsy and Traveller groups to come together with policy makers to have a say on their future, their most recent event has focused on adequate and desegregated housing. The reality for many though is still stigmatisation and discrimination which should be addressed at governmental and local levels to ensure that societal prejudices are overcome, and that Gypsy Traveller and Roma people are not viewed negatively wherever they decide to settle.

In conclusion, the scenario is a difficult situation to navigate as many sectors of society discriminate against Gypsy Traveller and Roma groups, it is ingrained in the beliefs of many, that as a people, they are criminals and will not care for the area they decide to inhabit. An inclusive leader should ensure that the best interests of the child is at the centre of any decisions that are made, keeping that in mind when challenging their own beliefs and that of the family, staff and the community surrounding the child. The inclusive leader should listen to the views of all stakeholders involved, challenge society stereotypes and the use of inappropriate language and make decisions on how best to develop stronger bonds within the school's community based on all the available information to provide the best outcomes for the child.

Section 2

What is a policy and why is it important?

According to Levin (1997) as stated in Baldock, Fitzgerald and Jay (2013), the term policy can be viewed in several ways and it aims to set out four things, a stated intention, action taken on an issue by those in authority, organisational or administrative practice or the status of a course of action. A policy will also entail: belongingness, for example, who the policy belongs to, commitment to a course of action, status to formally recognise it has been adopted by an organisation and specific details on how issues will be dealt with.

In 2018 there were over 3000 registered childminders in Wales (Dallymore, 2019) and with the further expansion of early years provision to include all two year olds with emphasis on equity of access to high quality provision for more deprived area (Welsh Government, 2024) the importance of clear policy making from a governmental level is essential in ensuring that early years setting have guidance to follow and to adapt to their unique settings that will allow them to embed the community values that surround a setting to reflect the diverse needs of each unique child as set out in the new curriculum for Wales (Knight and Crick, 2022).

One such policy that has been developed and is enshrined in law is the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*. This Act is a legally binding common purpose, encompassing seven well-being goals to ensure that Wales improves socially, economically, environmentally and culturally. This Act aims to ensure inclusive practice on all levels across sectors such as housing, health and education and aims to address issues of inequality in Wales with a holistic approach to improving outcomes for all, looking ahead to the future and not just for the present

The Act sets out the five ways of working to set out the principles that all people should use to ensure they how they act, the decisions and practices used ensure that the people of Wales will, in the future, have the same, if not better, opportunities to live well (Wales Council for Voluntary Action, 2020).

The first principle being thinking for the long term, this is vitally important when applied to early years provision as it is widely documented that the quality a child's experiences in the first five years of life can impact the rest of their lives. Good quality early years provision ensures the best outcomes for children well into adulthood (Gradovski *et al.* 2019), local authorities must consider what problems need to be addressed, for example, in area of high deprivation, is there enough access to suitable affordable housing (Welsh Government, 2021) where children and families have access to high quality childcare and other services such as healthcare and public transport. When a child has safe, secure housing and can

access high quality healthcare and education then they have a higher chance of developing to their full potential (Brown, Thurber and Shinn, 2023), however, predicting what will happen in the future can only be based on the information to hand at present and short-term goals may be easier to achieve. The Welsh Government has invested heavily in the overhaul of the new curriculum in Wales (Audit Wales, 2022) and new housing strategies (Welsh Government, 2021) to overcome housing shortages with a long term, holistic vision of how to ensure Wales will prosper.

The second principle being prevention which aims for early intervention to prevent problems arises, the well-being Act states that early intervention is needed to ensure the best outcomes for children, for example, the designed to smile initiative to encourage children and teach children how to look after their teeth and gums properly through providing toothbrush and toothpaste and encouraging brushing twice daily, this is a programme designed to target schools and nurseries in deprived areas (Welsh Government, no date and Howells, 2015). If children care for their teeth properly, in the future, dental care should be more accessible for all, Iomhair, Wilson and Morgan (2020) suggest that there is evidence of a drop in tooth decay in children aged 12 years since the programme was rolled out however, some settings believe that the designed to smile programme ate into curriculum time as a time consuming activity and that they were made to feel guilty by visiting dental professionals if they missed a day brushing (Filipponi, Richards and Coll, 2018). Time pressures and feeling as though schools have been given too many responsibilities may be a barrier to some prevention actions being taken.

The third principle of the Wellbeing Act being integration, the importance of working in a way that compliments other areas and services, for example, the new curriculum in Wales suggests that schools should become the hubs of communities, bringing together all aspects of what is important culturally and economically (Welsh Government, 2022), for example, developing a community garden, a setting may choose to design and work with others in the to develop a community flower bed in the local park, this should have positive benefits for all, for example, growing bee and butterfly friendly flowers that will enhance the wellbeing of visitors and the environment, encouraging insects and other wildlife into the area and encouraging the children to care for our local communities and all that inhabit it, however, schools may struggle to find a healthy balance between meeting the needs of their learners and welcoming visitors from the community into the school environment (Sinnema and Stoll, 2022).

The fourth principle in the wellbeing Act is collaboration, the idea of working in a multi-agency way to overcome provide solutions to problems using the resource and expertise available (Wales Council for Voluntary Action, 2020). An inclusive leader should work effectively with others from within and outside of the nursery setting to ensure the best outcomes for all, for example, working with children and families to design and build the vision, ethos and values of setting, however, practitioners may view multi-agency working and collaboration differently and hold the role of the contributors in greater or lesser regard (Martin, 2017).

The fifth principle of the well-being Act is involvement, the idea of not trying to solve problems in isolation but involving as many stakeholders as possible to help shape the services for better lives (Wales Council for Voluntary Action, 2020), within the early years setting parent engagement should be encouraged to ensure that the diversity of the community that surrounds the setting is lived every day (Pushor, 2013). Children should see themselves reflected in a setting, celebrating their culture, beliefs and values daily. Inclusive

leaders may run open door policies or have coffee mornings to encourage parents to share ideas on what and how the children will learn, encouraging parents to volunteer within the setting, parents may volunteer to read to or with the children to boost literacy skills.

Knight and Crick (2020) suggest that with the new curriculum in Wales and the introduction of a new way of caring and educating children, there are discrepancies between government policies and guidance, for example, the ALN code for Wales suggests reasonable adjustments, a term that can be interpreted differently within each setting, what one setting sees as an easy adjustment to make might pose challenges to others, for example, appropriate changing facilities for children who are not toileting. Are they always positioned close to the child's classroom or are they positioned at the far end of the school, what happens to staff ratios if two people leave the room to ensure the needs of the child are met through the care plan. The well-being Act, prevention of a problem or issue is not always possible to provide inclusive practice for every child. Dauncey (2016) suggests that how local authorities meet Additional Learning Needs (ALNs) across areas differs demonstrating that different local authorities are interpreting and applying the code differently.

The commissioner of the Act, Sophie Howe, suggests that there are limitations to the well-being Act, for example, if a public body is deemed as not acting in the spirit of the Act, reviews and recommendations for the future can be made, however, changes that have been made cannot be reversed and the Act does not far enough (BBC News, 2018).

Section 3

Inclusive practice and inclusive leadership can be difficult to define (Siraj and Hallet, 2013), however, for leaders, navigating an ever evolving sector such as the early years using guidance from various policies including the National Minimum Standards and the New Curriculum in Wales that link directly to supporting children, an inclusive practitioner must also be aware of circumstances that may happen outside of an early years setting that may have negative effects on the children and families they support. Housing and homelessness and a lack of affordable housing coupled with the cost-of-living crisis which includes high energy and food costs can put huge emotional and financial strain on families and it is not a problem that can be fixed in isolation and no country is immune to its effects (Webster and Neal, 2022). For many families the cost of living has meant that people's finances are not able to stretch to luxuries as paying bills comes first.

An inclusive leader should be creative with idea on how best to support families that go above and beyond the government's commitment to ending homelessness and initiatives such as free school meals for all primary aged children. Offering coffee mornings and a community warm space that is accessible not just to families but the wider communities to open their doors, for example, the Big Bocs Bwyd (BBB) run across a growing number of schools in the South Wales area. The scheme is based on a small café and pay as you feel shop that provides small meeting spaces and allows for school families and the wider community to come together to ensure that nobody goes hungry. Creating meeting spaces where parents, grandparents and people in the surrounding community can come together and help overcome social isolation. Creating a sense of cohesion and unity across different people within the community. Many schools also have growing spaces, polytunnels and beehives to supplement their shop which each school has adapted to meet their individual needs and available space (Big Bocs Bwyd, no date a).

Several schools have produced case studies that include information on what they hoped to achieve, the challenges and barriers they have each encountered and the benefits of the

BBB, comments such as, organising a volunteer workforce can be a challenge or getting the balance right between meeting the needs of both families and the wider community was a challenge for one school (Big Bocs Bwyd, no date b and Big Bocs Bwyd, no date c).

Inclusive behaviour however cannot be viewed as focusing all resources and energies on one area of need, inclusion looks at the needs of the child, their families and the wider community around the child. The benefits of the BBB are positive for many people within the school's community, providing social interactions, bringing together people to promote well-being and a sense of belonging, all of which are inclusive practices, however, an inclusive leader should continually reflect in practice to ensure they are meeting the evolving needs of the children and families they support.

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