

Section one

Inclusive Leadership, as described by Ferdman *et al* (2021) is an approach to leadership that emphasises the importance of promoting diversity, fostering belonging and actively engaging in creating an environment where every individual feels valued and respected. Inclusive leaders may have certain traits including an open mind, no judgments, and bias awareness (Bourke and Espedido, 2020). Roberson and Perry (2022) and Lindon (2011) support this, stating that inclusive leaders enhance outcomes with their mindset and behaviours and emphasise the need for continuous professional development to enhance skills and knowledge to shape a positive culture that prioritises all children's well-being and development.

Diversity means to include and accept all people from a range of different backgrounds, needs and abilities. This could be different genders, races and disabilities (Serves *et al*, 2022). For instance, inclusive leaders should make accommodations for children with disabilities. This includes physical resources such as ramps and assistive technologies, as well as specialised staff and support services.

Fredman *et al* (2021) state that inclusive leadership is critical in today's increasingly diverse societies. He goes on to state that societies need to be transformed into equitable spaces for both individual growth and society.

Specifically in the early years, inclusive practices are essential for promoting a sense of belonging among all children, which is critical for their social, emotional and cognitive development (Newstead and Isles-Buck, 2019).

This is supported by theorists such as Vygotsky who argue that children learn best in social contexts where they can interact with peers and adults. His concept of the 'zone of proximal development' suggests that children can achieve higher levels of understanding and skill when guided by knowledgeable others. Therefore, Inclusive practices are essential in creating diverse social environments where all children can learn from each other's experiences and abilities (Gauvain, 2020).

Similarly, Maria Montessori centres on the belief that children are natural learners who thrive in environments that support their independence and exploration. Montessori

advocated for inclusive classrooms where children of different ages and abilities learn together. This mixed-age grouping ensures children develop respect for others' differences (Dattke, 2014).

According to Devarakonda (2021), inclusion in the early years is crucial as it lays the foundation for a child's future learning, social development, and a sense of belonging. Devarakonda (2021) argues that when children are included from the earliest stages of education, they are more likely to develop a positive self-identity, respect for others and understanding of diversity. This is supported by Theoharis and Scanlan (2021) who state that children who are a part of diverse communities and are taught to be inclusive, produce better social and academic outcomes and are more likely to become informed citizens.

Inclusive practice in early childhood education is closely aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which emphasises every child's right to education, protection, and participation, regardless of their background or abilities (Unicef, 2019).

Scenario

Yulia, a four-year-old girl, has recently arrived in the UK with her mother Olena after fleeing the war in Ukraine. The traumatic experiences including exposure to violence and instability, have left her with emotional triggers and insecurities. Both Yuliya and Olena are struggling to adapt to their new environment as they do not speak fluent English and have left behind their familiar surroundings and support systems. This transition is incredibly challenging for both mother and daughter, who are dealing with the aftermath of their traumatic experiences while trying to integrate into unfamiliar culture, language and surroundings.

Yuliya, unable to fully understand or express her emotions due to her young age, often exhibits signs of distress. Simple occurrences, like loud noises or sudden movements, can trigger memories of the war causing her to react. The language barrier also makes it difficult for her to communicate with peers and teachers, negatively impacting her emotional state.

Olena is equally as affected. The responsibility of ensuring her daughter's safety and well-being in a new country is overwhelming. She struggles with adapting to her new daily life. Understanding English and completing normal daily tasks adds to the feeling of isolation. The language barrier in particular makes it challenging to advocate for her daughter's needs or to connect with other parents in the community.

Both mother and daughter are in need of both emotional and practical support to help them rebuild their lives and integrate into their new surroundings.

Child

Yuliya has been exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) due to exposure to war, displacement, and separation from family. These early traumas can have long-lasting effects on her mental, emotional, and physical health. Understanding Yuliya's ACEs is crucial for providing appropriate support, as it helps educators and practitioners recognise the potential impact on her behaviour and learning (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024).

To support Yuliya, an inclusive leader would focus on creating an environment that acknowledges her traumatic background and addresses her specific needs.

International Childhood Education (No date) states that inclusive practices create spaces where all children feel welcomed. This can be achieved by ensuring that learning activities are accessible and relevant to every child. Onuigbo (2013) highlights the necessity of adapting teaching methods to cater to a wide range of learning styles and abilities. This could involve modifying teacher approaches to suit individual needs. As a result, all children can participate meaningfully in the learning process. In this scenario, creating a consistent daily routine can help Yuliya feel more secure in her new setting. According to Minahan (2019), this consistency is crucial for children who have experienced trauma, as it provides a sense of stability and predictability that may have been lacking in their lives.

Teachers should also be encouraged to receive specialised training in cultural competency and trauma-informed practices to better support Yuliya, ensuring she feels safe, included, and able to thrive in her new setting (UNHCR, 2023).

The trauma-informed practice would significantly benefit Yuliya by creating a safe, supportive environment that acknowledges her experiences of war and displacement. This approach would help her feel understood and reduce anxiety by ensuring the setting is sensitive to her triggers (National Children's Bureau, 2021). The trauma-informed practice would also promote trust and stability, which are crucial for her emotional recovery (Bristol Early Years, No date).

In addition, interventions such as ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) would help Yuliya by providing a safe space where she can express her feelings and begin to process the trauma she experienced. Through tailored sessions, a trained ELSA can help Yuliya develop coping strategies, build emotional resilience, and improve her social skills (ELSA Network, 2017).

Mindfulness would also benefit Yulia's mental health. A study by Dunning *et al* (2019) indicates that mindfulness-based interventions can have a positive impact on various aspects of mental health in children. This includes reductions in anxiety, depression, and stress as well as improvements in emotional regulation.

Moreover, Language support is crucial for Yuliya's successful integration into the setting. According to Unicef (2023), promoting and developing the Ukrainian language among refugee children is essential for maintaining their cultural identity and easing their transition into a new educational environment. Resources and strategies that support bilingualism and language retention can help Yuliya feel more comfortable and supported in her new surroundings, helping both her emotional and academic development.

Strategies may include learning Yuliya's name and being able to pronounce it correctly is significant for the integration of Yuliya. Students and teachers pronouncing and learning Yuliya's name may make her feel less isolated and more understood (Virtual

College, 2023). Yuliya can also be provided with flashcards and visuals, a great strategy for children who are new to English (The Bell Foundation, No date).

Finally, social interactions with peers are important for feeling a sense of belonging for refugee children. Teachers should help Yuliya build relationships, feel included and establish a sense of belonging in the new setting. These social interactions are crucial for her emotional and social development (Martin *et al*, 2023). Encouraging peer interactions through structured activities can help Yuliya build friendships despite the language barrier. Warsi (2017) states that teachers should create play experiences that do not require English including creative play and music.

By implementing all of these strategies and approaches, the setting ensures inclusivity for all.

Family

Brown and Palaiologou (2016) highlight the significance of working with parents as they are central to understanding a child's unique needs, cultural background, and experiences. This collaboration ensures that educational practices are tailored to support each child effectively and ensures families feel a sense of belonging and trust. Supporting Olena is equally important for creating a supportive and inclusive environment for Yuliya.

Block *et al* (2014) state that practitioners should engage with refugee parents in meaningful ways, such as through culturally sensitive communication. This approach helps build trust and ensures the family feels supported, which is crucial for Yuliya's successful integration.

Inclusive leaders can take several steps to help Olena adjust and feel included including providing language assistance. Practitioners can offer written materials in Ukrainian or use technology to help Olena understand the educational process and feel more connected to her daughter's learning (Gonzalez, 2015). This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasises the importance of the

family environment in a child's development. By supporting Olena, the setting indirectly supports Yuliya's well-being (Zaatari and Maalouf, 2022).

Additionally, Inclusive leaders can offer information sessions including school tours, induction days and learning walks to include Olena in the setting and maintain positive parent partnerships and engagement (Foundation House, No date).

Furthermore, Olena is at significant risk of experiencing various emotional challenges due to her displacement. This can include anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder due to the trauma of fleeing a warzone, leaving behind her home, and dealing with the uncertainty of her new environment (Daou, 2022). Inclusive leaders should support Olena by providing information regarding support services such as one-to-one counselling and health and wellbeing workshops (Refugee Council, No date). A study by Hamari *et al* (2022) shows that parent support groups are known to be effective for both children and parents. For children, the programmes reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression as well as PTSD reactions. For parents, support groups reduced the same mental health symptoms and reactions as well as improved parent-child-relationship quality and communication skills.

Professionals

Collaborating with other professionals is a key component of successful education practices. Teachers need to work closely with special education professionals, psychologists, counsellors, and other specialists to meet the diverse needs of all children (Woodcock *et al*, 2022).

It is important to build collaborative relationships. Inclusive leaders should create and maintain strong relationships with all practitioners, professionals and parents to ensure all voices are heard and valued (Agbenyega and Klibthong, 2022). This is further supported by Kelly *et al* (2022), who state that inclusive practices are most effective when there is good collaboration between teachers, school leaders, parents and other members of the community. Building trust and mutual respect among team members

and participating in open communication and active listening is important for these collaborative relationships (Ferdman *et al*, 2021).

Additionally, Newstead and Isles-Buck (2019) and Agbenyega and Klibthong (2022) highlight the importance of providing staff with the training and resources they need to implement inclusive practices effectively. Teachers need to be provided with the necessary materials and tools to address the diverse needs of the children. Including the opportunity for ongoing professional development focused on addressing the diverse needs of children. Training could include cultural competence and English as an additional language (EAL). This is supported by Lane (2008) who emphasises the importance of ongoing professional development focused on racial equality and inclusivity. Lane (2008) also encourages self-reflection and states practitioners should recognise their own biases and how these can impact their interactions with children. In this scenario, it is significant that all teachers welcome Yuliya, adapt their teaching methods, and be sensitive to the trauma Yuliya faces.

Community

Involving the community is key to creating a network of support for Yuliya and her mother. Establishing connections with local refugee support organisations such as The Welsh Refugee Council, can provide the family with additional resources such as counselling services, cultural integration programs, and language classes.

Organisations such as The Welsh Refugee Council, have specialised expertise in dealing with challenges faced by refugee families (Welsh Refugee Council, 2024).

Additionally, organising or attending cultural exchange events such as the Arts Council of Wales 'Nurturing cultural exchanges with Ukrainian Arts and Culture' can promote understanding and inclusivity, by celebrating Ukrainian culture, Yuliya and her mother can be a part of a welcoming environment, helping them feel valued and supported (Arts Council of Wales, 2024). Ukrainian/Welsh Cultural Exchange was a past event that included Welsh volunteers and Ukrainians who gathered for coffee, cake and

conversations (Tenby MAAG, 2022). Events like this would be beneficial for both Yuliya and Olena's engagement with the community.

Challenges

Inclusion in schools presents numerous challenges. One of the primary difficulties is institutional challenges. Schools are often under-resourced, especially in areas with high levels of poverty. The implementation of inclusive practices requires not only skilled practitioners but also access to specialised support services, adaptive technologies and resources. However, due to budget constraints and policy limitations, many schools are unable to provide these resources (Day and Prunty, 2014).

Similarly, teacher training and ongoing professional development are often inadequate. Teachers need to be trained to effectively teach children who have a range of abilities, learning styles, and socio-emotional needs. A lack of professional development opportunities focused on differentiation, special education and cultural competence can result in teachers being unequipped to meet the needs of all children (Juvonen *et al*, 2019). Devarakonda (2021) supports this and states teachers lack confidence, knowledge and understanding regarding the diverse cultures, backgrounds and abilities of children. Highlighting the need for adequate training and professional development.

Moreover, the curriculum itself can be a barrier to inclusion. According to Pandit and Mishra (2016), the curriculum may not be relevant or accessible to all children. Most curricula do not allow the flexibility needed to adapt to diverse learners or for teachers to try and experiment with new approaches. Curricula should be open and flexible, welcoming and including every child. Jackson (2021) supports this and states that a barrier includes time constraints. Adapting curriculum and integrating complete inclusive education requires a lot of time.

Knowles (2017) also highlights how a challenge to inclusion is the resistance to change. Teachers and other professionals may be reluctant to adopt new practices or alter existing ones. This could be a result of several factors including a lack of understanding or awareness of the benefits of inclusion, comfort with traditional approaches or fear of

additional work. This is supported by Mpu and Adu (2021) who also add that some teachers may have negative attitudes and misconceptions about disabilities. These attitudes may impact the effective inclusion of learners with disabilities.

It is important to be an inclusive leader but it is equally as important to have an inclusive curriculum. The New Curriculum for Wales' core vision is to create "ambitious, capable learners" who are "ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world". The vision promises inclusivity, ensuring that every learner, despite background, ability or identity can engage fully and equally (Welsh Government, 2024a). However, there is a clear difference between aspirations and implementation. The Welsh Government (2024b) reports show schools find it challenging to provide effective inclusive education due to a lack of understanding and knowledge, insufficient staff numbers and weak leadership arrangements. Highlighting the ineffective implementation of an inclusive curriculum.

Section two

In Wales, Policies and professional guidance in education are crucial for ensuring all children receive high-quality education tailored to their individual needs. These policies provide a framework for maintaining standards, promoting inclusion and safeguarding children's well-being. They also guide teachers in practice, ensuring consistency and fairness across schools. Additionally, these policies support the professional development of teachers, ensuring they have the skills and knowledge needed to meet the diverse needs of children and to adapt to educational reforms (ICO, 2013). Some key policies and professional guidance for schools and early years provisions in Wales include the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code for Wales, the Welsh Government's Safeguarding Policy and the Healthy Schools Scheme.

The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales, stemming from the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Wales Act 2018, is a key policy that claims to enable inclusivity in the early years. It is a statutory document that provides detailed guidance on how the principles of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Wales

Act 2018 should be implemented (Welsh Government, 2021). The ALN code was developed from the previous Special Educational Needs framework. It was replaced aiming to create a more inclusive, person-centred approach to supporting children and young people with additional learning needs (Welsh Government, 2022). The ALN code claims to enable inclusivity by ensuring leaders in early years settings take a proactive approach to identifying and meeting the needs of children with ALN. Requiring leaders to ensure that their settings are equipped with the resources, training, and policies necessary to support all children, regardless of their additional learning needs. Also placing a strong emphasis on collaboration between education, health, and social services, taking a multi-agency approach to support all children (Welsh Government, 2024c).

While the ALN code claims to enable inclusive leadership, reports find that the implementation of the ALN code is shown to be challenging for several reasons. Firstly, the ALN Code states that children with additional learning needs should receive appropriate support in their settings however the availability of this support is often constrained by funding limitations. Early years settings may struggle to access the necessary resources such as specialist staff and learning materials (Eystyn, 2023). Despite some settings being able to fund these resources, the implementation needs to be consistent in all settings for the ALN Code to be inclusive. This lack of support can make it difficult for children to thrive. As a result, parents feel they have no choice but to withdraw their children from the school system and opt for home education (Maxwell *et al*, 2018).

Additionally, a significant flaw in the ALN Code is the lack of mandatory requirement for teachers in Wales to receive training in the detection of Additional learning needs. According to Snap Cymru (No date) approximately one in five learners in Wales have ALN. Early and accurate identification of ALN is crucial for ensuring that children receive the right support (Husaini, No date), yet many teachers are not equipped with the necessary skills to detect these needs effectively (Welsh Parliament, 2023). Without proper diagnosis, these children may be overlooked, leading to delays in receiving the

appropriate interventions and support that are vital for their educational development. The lack of teacher training not only affects individual children but also impacts the overall inclusivity of the educational environment.

This is supported by McLachlan and Davis (2013) who underline the importance of adequate training for all staff involved in supporting ALN students. There are currently insufficient amounts of trained staff in Wales. Despite the high number of children with ALN, teachers in Wales are not required to undergo specific training in ALN detection and support. This lack of required training can leave many ALN children in mainstream education without the necessary support. The ALN Code emphasises the need for appropriately trained staff to deliver personalised support to ALN children. The lack of mandatory training and the inconsistent availability of professional development. If staff are not sufficiently trained, the inclusive aims of the ALN Code cannot be implemented.

Moreover, Maxwell *et al* (2018) state that the ALN Code isn't inclusive as children with ALN are not supported in mainstream schools as the Code declares. Firstly, there is a focus on assessment and attainment which often leaves children with ALN behind, as their unique needs are not met by a one-size-fits-all approach to education. Also, some parents feel schools encourage or force children with ALN to leave because they are seen as too challenging to support within the existing system. This could be because of staff ratios and training.

The ALN Code promotes inclusive education by ensuring that schools are equipped to support children with ALN. However, the findings suggest that schools are not always able to do this effectively, leading to the exclusion of these children from mainstream education. This exclusion is a contradiction to the code's intention of creating inclusive educational environments.

In conclusion, while the policies and professional guidance in Wales, such as the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) code, are designed to ensure inclusivity in early years education, there are challenges to its implementation. These include insufficient funding, inadequate teacher training, and inconsistent support across educational

settings. Although the ALN code promotes a person-centred approach and collaboration with services, the effectiveness is impacted by these barriers. To truly achieve inclusive education, it is essential to address these challenges, ensuring that all children including those with ALN, receive the support they need.

Section 3

Beyond the desk: Embracing flexible seating to support children with additional learning needs.

In early years education, creating an environment where every child feels comfortable and supported is crucial (Welsh Government, 2023). For children with Additional learning needs (ALN), traditional classroom seating arrangements can sometimes be a barrier to their engagement. Flexible seating is an approach that steers away from the desk-to-chair set up to promote an inclusive and supportive learning environment. This blog explores how flexible seating can make a significant impact and how it forms the principles of inclusive leadership.

Understanding the need for flexible seating

Children with ALN, including those with sensory processing challenges, attention difficulties, or physical disabilities, often require different types of support in their learning environment. Traditional seating arrangements may not always meet these needs effectively. Here is why flexible seating supports children with ALN;

1. **Sensory Regulation:** For children with sensory processing challenges, traditional seating can be uncomfortable and overstimulating. Flexible seating options like wobble chairs, sensory cushions, or fidget tools can help them manage their sensory needs, allowing them to stay focused and engaged (Sadr *et al*, 2017).
2. **Physical Comfort:** Children with physical disabilities or discomfort may struggle with conventional desks and chairs. Adjustable seats, standing desks, or floor

seating can provide alternative ways for them to participate in classroom activities comfortably (Wilson, 2020).

3. Enhanced focus: For children with ADHD and general attention challenges, flexible seating allows them to choose a position that helps them concentrate better. The hyperactive or impulsive symptoms of ADHD include having trouble staying in a seat, often fidgeting and being extremely impatient (Miller, 2023).

This approach allows children to choose their seating arrangement based on their needs and can enhance their overall engagement in learning. When children feel comfortable and supported, they are more likely to participate actively in classroom activities.

How flexible seating promotes inclusive leadership in the early years

Inclusive leadership is encouraged through flexible seating arrangements by recognising and accommodating the diverse needs of all children and ensuring all children can engage and learn comfortably. Flexible seating also gives children a sense of empowerment. When given the choice to select seating that best suits their needs, children develop a sense of independence.

Additionally, traditional seating can create barriers to learning for children with ALN. Being uncomfortable in the classroom not only impacts learning and engagement but also increases the risk of distress, worry and sadness.

Overall, flexible seating creates an inclusive learning environment for children's additional learning needs. Addressing these diverse needs helps eliminate barriers to learning and creates a classroom atmosphere of support and happiness. Committing to these approaches reflects an inclusive leader, follows UNCRC rights of the child and aligns with legislations such as the Additional Learning Needs and Tribunal Wales Act 2018.

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