

Section 1.

The definition of a catalytic leader (CL) is described as a change agent, to have the desire to instigate momentous change and ignite action into others. A CL will be one to ask questions first and show curiosity, elevate the performance of others to achieve the best possible outcomes and to motivate others using forward thinking and empathy and connect emotionally. A CL will have practitioners feed off their energy and enthusiasm, being supportive and motivating others, having an effect on others described as truly a defining characteristic of a catalyst leader (Powers 2017 and Connor 2013). In the same way, Clark (2022) expresses leadership in the early years as a key quality and a CL will bring about change and improvement with inspiration and confidence. Bradt (2015) agrees CL will inspire other work colleagues to deliver different strategies in the setting, gain confidence and in doing so, display high expectations. Furthermore, Clarke (2022) states that although it may look like a CL is in charge they are not in a position of power. Lalonde, (2017) describes a CL as a forward thinker, having a vision to do something new and going above and beyond, wanting the change to happen for the better. On the other hand, he suggests there are not enough CL's but they are needed to continue moving forward as there is change occurring more frequently.

Similarly, Siraj and Hallet (2016) argue that the word leader, in the context of early years, is not common terminology and moreover, the numerous job titles within this sector can lead to confusion with roles and responsibilities. There are concerns with policy makers who will be more focused on the quality of provision and how it should it look, requiring minimum standards are met. Additionally, the concept of the leadership role is ill-defined and used loosely with day-to-day routines and practitioners have had to consider their practice, reflect and identify how to improve. In England, an Early Years Professional is described to lead practice and inspire other practitioners around them. However, individual practice is not the problem but the knowledge and understanding surrounding the definition of the word leader. To achieve this support practitioners are to engage in critical reflection of their experiences and preconceptions, learning these skills can bring about transformation in the EY (Hadfield, Jopling, and Needham 2015 and Clarke 2012).

Aubrey and Riley (2019) discuss Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological systems and how he believed that through the immediate environment, children's social relationships develop and grow, which is an essential factor that associates with the future of their educational journey.

Leadership is said to be all around, you cannot appoint or choose a leader, it is always happening, they emerge and furthermore it is recognised that most people are leaders, albeit diverse leadership styles, based on knowledge and understanding, experiences and beliefs, leaders will have the confidence to support others to gain those invaluable experiences. Leaders are valued with the skills and personal qualities of knowledge and passion, self-confidence and assertiveness, and expertise. They will develop innovative ideas, and ways to work using reflective practise, inspire trust and result in a positive relationship with work colleagues. In

contrast to this, there is a clear difference between management and leadership, although equally important, and if secure skills of management worked perfectly well it is suggested there would not be a need for leaders in the early years. However, management and leaders co-exist but leaders are everywhere. A manager will be a person of authority and have essential tasks that are to be addressed therefore can become side-lined from the setting. A leader in the early years will be responsive to a situation and have a flexible approach leadership will not exist without followers and an effective team. Additionally, the term manager and leader are interchangeable and can be used for a different purpose causing confusion, as in an early year setting it can be described as both structure and systems (Linden, Linden and Beckley 2016). Veazey (2018) states effective leadership is essential in the early years, it can result in a high-quality learning environment, supporting all children to ensure their needs and rights are at the centre of their practice and early years practitioners will be motivated to engage and improve their practice. Johnson (2015) agrees that for an early years setting to thrive depends on the success of the leadership at all levels in the organisation.

On the other hand, although Nicholson (2020) describes leadership involves influencing others towards a positive change he states there are barriers in the development of leadership, for example there is limited opportunities for practitioners to feel confident to develop leadership skills, a lack of capacity to work collaboratively with colleagues to observe good practice to inform change and the absence of continued professional development and career progression. There is confusion surrounding the exact definition of leadership as frameworks in the early years is believed to have created a tradition that demonstrates formal authority within the early years sector.

Adams (2020) holds the view that there is increasing emphasis on performance-driven approaches which are widespread, therefore concerns are raised, and it is recognised that there is insufficient attention being paid to the 'whole child'. The priority in primary schools tends to lean towards tests and examinations and performance indicators which come at the expense of both children and practitioners. There is a need to educate the whole child, move beyond a narrow curriculum and accountability system. Florez and Assael (2020) identify another problem with leadership is the unequal distribution of knowledge practitioners may or may not have, leading to a lack of participation with emerging demands and recognising social justice difficulties.

Similarly, Siraj and Hallet (2016) indicate leadership in the early years is evolving and it has been recognised as momentous in raising the standards in health and social outcomes and developing quality provision for children and families. Leadership and learning reshape leadership and is recognised as an aspect of professionalism. As there is many changes happening across the early year sector, one of the key skills necessary in leadership is the ability to understand the process of change, lead and be able to implement it.

Welsh Government (2017) state everyone in Wales should have the opportunities and experiences to reach their full potential. Throughout the years significant policies have been developed within the Early Years sector to ensure all children lead happy and healthy lives, enabling them to feel belonging and participate fully in their communities and participate in the future economy of Wales. Practitioners have a vital role to ensure children have the best possible start, creating a safe, stimulating environment, and demonstrating good practice and standards. These findings suggest, the Welsh Government (2017) must develop a skilled childcare and play workforce to enable the success of this plan, ensuring practitioners working with young children are identified as an important profession of the early years. Furthermore, practitioners have a passion and uses the influence to improve the lives of others, therefore it is a career choice to work with young children to improve the education and care of the early years in Wales.

O'Sullivan (2015) states an essential element of a good early years setting is a result of successful leadership, nonetheless it can become a personal challenge to reflect on how or why practitioners lead. Effective and knowledgeable leadership is critical to a successful early years setting. Brock (2014) acknowledges the ongoing reforms in the early years can affect all aspects of children's and families' lives. Many decisions are being made and it is important for all practitioners to consolidate and reflect on their practice.

The quality of early childhood, education and care has always been high on the agenda with governments. A regular key aim for governments is to reduce and eliminate poverty and social disadvantage in young children and to ensure their well-being is positive. Additionally, child poverty has always been high with unemployment recognised as a crucial factor affecting academic outcomes for young children. In the past, delivery of early years education was the responsibility of local authorities, thus leaving inconsistencies within the country. national policy is sometimes seen to affect the services, the policy is depicted as a framework that is mandatory to follow and work within their settings for early years practitioners (Miller and Hevey 2016).

Section 2.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a complete statement of children's rights and is described as the biggest ratified international human rights treaty in history. Since it was adopted, 196 countries have signed up to the UNCRC, with only one country still to ratify. All countries are bound by international law to ensure the rights of the child are implemented and this monitored by a Committee on the Rights of the Child. It has 54 articles that cover all aspects of a child's life including economic, political, civil, social, and cultural rights that children are entitled to. Subsequently, there are general principles with the rights all interlinked and are all equally important, they interpret the articles, and it is fundamental to realise these rights for all children. (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2019, UNICEF and Save the Children No date). Like wise, NSPCC Learning (2020) state there has been legislation to protect children since the 1880's however as time has gone by there have been disturbing factors surrounding the protection of children which have led to the creation of child protection systems in the UK. Additionally, Eglantyne Jebb was a woman who founded Save the Children in 1919, over 100 years ago, described as a prominent figure and dedicated to the rights of children. She wanted to make a change after she witnessed children starving on the streets and realised children's rights had been abandoned (Save the Children No date). Furthermore, she presented a Declaration of the Rights of the Child to world leaders during a convention in Geneva, it was this declaration which formed the basis of the UNCRC which we know of today.

The post of a Children's Commissioner was recommended in the UK after a report was conducted by Lord Laming regarding the Victoria Climbié Inquiry, similarly people in Wales campaigned for a Children's Commissioner for many years. The campaign intensified after the Waterhouse Inquiry which investigated the abuse of children suffering in a North Wales children's home. Subsequently, the Welsh Assembly and Ministers approached the UK Government to advise them to create a Children's Commissioner. Primarily, the role was to protect children and young people in care, reflecting the legislation within the Social Care Act 2000. However, this changed very quickly and in 2001 the Children's Commissioner for Wales Act 2001 was created giving more powers and duties to include all children and young people in Wales. The role ensures to promote the views and interests of all children. To work with children, closely, understanding what children think about things that can potentially affect them, supporting everyone who works with young children to take their best interests into consideration. The children's and family act 2014 strengthened the powers of the children's commissioner, regarding children who had been in care, living away from the family home or in social care. (Children's Commissioner 2023 and Hillman 2010).

Wales was the first in the United Kingdom to appoint a Children's Commissioner in 2001, and over the past three decades have strived to support and improve the lives of all children and young people aged 0-18 years old, aged 21 if in care and 25 if in care and in education. Additionally, the role will influence the Government of Wales on important key issues and have regard for the UNCRC, ensuring the rights and

needs of the child are met and have the power to make representations to the Welsh Government about matters affecting the rights and welfare of children which concern her and for which she does not have the power to act (Welsh Government 2021)

Rocio Cifuentes is the Children's Commissioner of Wales. She was appointed in April 2022 and will be in post for seven years, to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children across Wales. One of her many roles, but one of high importance, is to focus on the rights of the child, and to scrutinise how the decisions made by public bodies in Wales affect those rights of all children. Complementary to this, the Children's Commissioner will encourage children and young people to find out and learn about their rights under the UNCRC but also listen to children to find out what is important to them growing up in Wales. She will support and give advice to children, young people and their families especially if treated unfairly. She will be the voice for all children in Wales on critical issues that may affect them.

Building Blocks: Inclusion in the Foundation Phase.

The Children's Commissioner for Wales is described as an independent children's human rights institution, the remit for the role can be found in the Children's Commissioner for Children's Act 2001, and has a range of powers to promote a positive change in Wales for all children. She will have the power to examine cases and provide assistance in respect of individual children in certain circumstances.

The issues faced with the Building Bocks report is the escalation of exclusion in the Early Years (EY), spanning a number of years, after it was brought to the attention of the Children's Commissioner by a parent whose six year old child had been excluded due to social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). This challenging behaviour has caused difficulties between schools and local authorities, leaving families feeling frustrated and worried about their children. Additionally, it was concerning that the children's rights and needs were not being met or maintained, Article 28 of the UNCRC state every child has the right to education and primary education is compulsory and available to all, furthermore education must support and develop a child's personality and their talents. It was identified that there were gaps in education provision and confusion regarding the process of referrals, children were either receiving no education, facing exclusion, or learning in isolation. Subsequently, common factors of the challenges identified were children not having the experiences to support their development therefore having difficulties with social, emotional and behavioural issues. Equally important was the negative impact this could have on their young lives, affecting their development and leading to difficulties as they grow, denying them their human rights to flourish and reach their potential. Power and Taylor (2021) describe the effects of exclusion on young children can present feelings of personal failure and anxieties, furthermore, in the long term they can suffer prolonged periods of unemployment, poor mental and physical health and can become involved in criminal activities.

The evidence suggests there are numerous challenges when a child starts their journey in the Foundation Phase. There are issues with children's development and an urgency for specialist support for the individual child immediately when the need is identified. Their home and community environment are not suitable, there are struggles with poverty which can result in poor family relationships all play a crucial factor. In addition to this, there is an absence of advice and support, health expertise and neurodevelopmental services. All professionals need to have the knowledge of the vast range of services available and how to access them.

Based on these findings, the Children's Commissioner put immediate actions and recommendations to the Welsh Government to address the issues of inclusion in the Foundation Phase for school leaders, local authorities, and education consortia as children in Wales were facing barriers to accessing their human rights to an education. For example, a toolkit was created for schools, Building Blocks: Inclusion in the Foundation Phase, which was developed with the collaboration of experienced school staff that experienced successful inclusive practice. A whole school approach and training opportunities for all practitioners to be made aware of this resource, to reflect and improve their practice when working with children who express challenging behaviour. However, is there enough adequate staff training in the Early Years for practitioners with many not aware of this toolkit to support their practice?

Specifically, an action plan for primary schools to be put in place was another recommendation, with emphasis on early intervention and support, for all practitioners to approach these challenges in the right way, eliminating exclusion for the child. What is more, key specialist roles to be identified for recruitment in the Early Years.

However, there are more early years practitioners leaving the profession due to lack of training opportunities and poor pay progression (Lawler 2021). It has been recognised that review of funding for training and development is not sufficient and furthermore, it has not been improved to keep valuable staff in the sector. This results in a high turnover of staff and lack of consistency is created.

Section 3.

Unfortunately, poverty at present is a global part of a child's life, suffering deprivation of their most basic needs. The United Nations General Assembly created a definition of poverty, in December 2006, recognising children deprived of nutrition, water, shelter, education, and protection is most detrimental to them enjoying their rights and being able to reach their full potential. This resulted in governments having a clear direction when this definition was brought to the attention of all world leaders in dealing with child poverty (Minujin and Nandy 2012).

The Welsh Government's Child Poverty Indicator states there is an estimated 31% of children living in income poverty. This equates to over 190,000 children in Wales living in poverty. Furthermore, the Welsh Government recognise children's rights are fundamental in their approach to tackling child poverty. The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 has due regard for the UNCRC and it has a duty to promote the knowledge of the UNCRC and to address the root causes of poverty (Welsh Government 2022).

The Welsh Government state child poverty is unacceptable in Wales however the levels remain extremely high. The publication, Child Poverty Strategy in Wales (2015), set out three strategic objectives, with the aspiration of eliminating child poverty by 2020, although recognising this to be extremely challenging. The objectives were, to reduce the number of children living in workless households, increasing skills, and reducing inequalities in health, education, and economic outcomes. Subsequently, one focus was to create more jobs for the growth of economy in Wales and to increase household income for families, however changes to the tax and benefits system had an impact on this. Additionally, employment opportunities are a crucial factor, wage levels can have an impact but if families are not earning enough, they will still be living in poverty. Lambie-Mumford and Green (2017) state the need for food banks has significantly increased, thus providing a role in the provision of care for children, especially where deprivation is of the highest, identified as a key role in caring for children as it has a significant impact on children's lives and household incomes.

Objective three of the strategy focuses on children in the early years. The Welsh Government want all children to live happy, healthy lives, free of poverty. The Early Years has been invested in heavily by the Welsh Government, recognising the link between poverty and poor education outcomes, prevention of poverty to be central to the development of policies and programmes. A key theme of those policies is to support parents in providing a home environment where their children can thrive and develop, resulting in children being able to learn, support families with good parenting skills, mental health, and emotional wellbeing, will result in progression of educational outcomes for the child. The Welsh Government continue to invest in Flying Start areas, supporting families from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, receiving more targeted support from local services. children living in disadvantaged areas to have better start in life (Welsh Government 2011 and Welsh Government 2015)

Poverty is one of the significant barriers facing children and young people in Wales, preventing children to achieve better life outcomes. Children in Wales are at risk of poor physical health, emotional health and wellbeing while living in low-income households, additionally children are not meeting their developmental milestones in the early years, speech and language development is below average and children are more likely to have poor attendance in education (Welsh Government 2015).

The evaluation of this publication identified the scale of the programme did not have enough of an impact for tackling poverty, the services, programmes, and projects were funded on a short-term basis, making it difficult to achieve the best outcomes. More importantly, it is recognised to tackle child poverty it must be a cross-government issue ensuring children's rights are key to the overall approach. the Welsh Government's economic strategy needs to be highlighted and linked more to the Child Poverty Strategy. Furthermore, partnership working to tackle child poverty need to be a collaborative approach to deliver the outcomes successfully (Welsh Government 2015).

Similarly, The Scottish Government (2018) recognise the traumatic impact a child can experience when living in poverty and how it can affect their overall wellbeing, education, and the ability to learn and identify poverty with having a lack of income. The Child Poverty Act 2017 is a key piece of legislation in Scotland with the aim to eliminate child poverty by focusing on income measures, increasing family incomes, and reducing costs, to support and help children and families across Scotland. It requires local authorities, health boards and multi-agencies to come together and work collaboratively to report on their finding annually to eradicate child poverty.

The Welsh Government (2022) state the lack of progression to tackle poverty in Wales is the result of decisions that have been made in Westminster, the welfare reform has influenced the levels of poverty in Wales and has affected families who were disadvantaged before the welfare reform was put in place. In addition to this, the coronavirus pandemic was another challenge faced by the Welsh Government, where availability of services was reduced or paused for a period, heightening the impact on child poverty and the development of children under the age of 5. As a result, the Welsh Government invested £18.5 million pounds into the Child Development since 2020, helping to support local authorities plus a further £14 million pounds into their Early Help programme, to address waiting lists and provide support for young children and their families who were seen as vulnerable after the pandemic.

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