

## Section 1 - What is Catalytic Leadership?

Tammeaid, Virtanen, & Meyer (2022) Identify catalytic leadership as a skilled approach in strong communication through consultation, discussion, and the ability to listen. As well as this, the adeptness to motivate and drive dialogue towards realisation, through the process of shared thinking and co-creation, and ultimately being an advocate for good practice and positive change.

An example of Catalytic Leadership is provided by Parker (1958) who introduces readers to the Civil and Human rights activist Ella Baker. Parker describes Baker's catalytic leadership approach and how it is based on a combination of practicing self-examination, the ability to listen openly with intent, and intercommunication in the field of social fairness and inclusivity. Although most certainly a catalyst in every way, Baker educated communities and nurtured the next generation of critical thinking leaders, empowering revolutionaries through working together to actively fight for the future of social inclusivity and against discrimination. (DeLaure, 2008)

However, while known to many as a radical influencer, James (1994) states that Ella Baker is not a well-known figure in the history of the civil rights movement, unrecognised as a heroine of political activism. This according to DeLaure (2008) who writes similarly to James (1994) is largely due to Miss Baker being ostracised for her progressivist beliefs and possibly her gender and social background. Furthermore, there is a lack of documented public address or written accounts of her work through the years. Parker (1958) believes this was purposeful along with James (1994) and DeLaure (2008) Yet testimonies from those who Baker influenced and gave a voice have since built an extensive picture of the quiet catalytic leader and her invaluable guidance, known for sowing seeds of empowerment, and taking little credit for what grew from them. (DeLaure, 2008)

McDowall Clark (2012) Looks comprehensively at professionals and care givers working within the Early Years environment, and their gateways to becoming catalytic leaders. "Change Agents". McDowall Clark (2012) Believe that regardless of the position held within an establishment, all individuals have the capacity to evoke change and progressive transformation. Influencers and catalytic leaders can come in any form when modelling explorative concepts and through these innovative visionaries, pathways are built to improve situations, services, and outcomes.

Adejokun, (2021) Discusses the importance of catalytic leadership in the early years by researching theories and models that inspired impactful change in areas of early years education. Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Waldorf, are described by Adejokun (2021) as individual leaders who made a dynamic difference, leading to the enhancement of learning and quality development through new perspectives. Breaking moulds set over time.

Within the early year's workforce, reflection upon challenges and repeated experiences are the driving force behind strong catalytic leadership choices. For

example, what works? What doesn't work? Why? How can it be improved? (Nicholson & Maniates, 2016)

This type of pedagogy can allow not just early years professionals, but parent's, carers and supporting adults to use their initiative, empowering, collaborating and sharing in emergent thinking to best support the individual's development through action. (Ho, 2010) Congruent to the ideas of McDowall Clark (2012)

During a research project studying leadership practice in the early years, Klevering and McNae (2018) argue that defining how to lead and who would lead well, is a vague concept to classify. This research identified that the most clearly perceived leadership skills often came to light through circumstantial experiences, which were difficult to analyse. But again, similarly to the work of Ho. (2010) and McDowall Clark (2012) they believe that the concept of leadership is something available to everyone, and a quality that can expose itself through situations, environments, and backgrounds of individual service providers.

While the theory of catalytic leadership and everyone having the ability to lead positive change seems popular in Early Years, with the new curriculum being constructed (Welsh Government 2020) there are some barriers and challenges that can be detrimental to the process.

Within the Early Years specifically, McDowall Clarke (2012) is inclined to believe that there is an extensive history of leadership models deriving from authority and power, which are ineffective in practice compared with the models delivered daily from within a setting. Catalytic leaders are becoming increasingly important in the early years due to the evolving nature of every individual child's journey, the setting and social diversity challenges that must be considered to make progress.

Unfortunately, some of the barriers that run alongside this can be destructive in an education setting. (Eckert, 2021) (Lanka, Topakas and Patterson, 2019) Especially when leadership becomes a controlled, one-person, self-obsessed journey, or when there is too much pressure on one person as a leader. (Eckert, 2021)

Klevering and Mcnae (2018) state that problems are evident through research regarding the alignment of sole leadership ambitions. Leaders can expose themselves to feeling overwhelmed and under immense pressure to deliver results. At this time, and feeling like there are no other options, they may turn towards the use of existing or known leadership models that are unsuitable in their settings.

Eckert (2021) describes the difference a Catalytic leader can afford an education system. His scientific explanation of a 'Catalyst' which is the ignition of a reaction, helps to form the hypothesis of a person who puts weight behind a change and then allows others to make those ideas, become a reality. This Eckert (2021) describes as a sustainable way to lead. Rodd (2013) Agrees and suggests it is a critical requirement of catalytic leadership to inspire those around them, communicate effectively and look after themselves and each other in the process.

Adejokun (2021) also believes collaboration is key in leadership in the early years but also states that catalytic leaders must pay particular attention to observation and the reflective response to practice as it unfolds.

Catalytic leaders in education have the power to create opportunities to allow others freedom to enhance change in a broad spectrum, they must be ethically and diversely informed and always open to suggestion. Linking back to Parker (2018) and her description of Ella Baker and her strong but silent Catalytic approach to leadership.

Just like Baker, Parker (2020) describes her fight to support the unbalanced social justice system and to assist the more vulnerable communities in situational circumstances.

Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton (2013) Refuse to promote a definition for social inclusion/exclusion as the writers describe social circumstances as personal and vastly changeable. They discuss throughout their publication, some of the early years cultural and sociological factors in education, such as poverty and destitution, family circumstances, access to education and collective community.

Brodie and Savage (2015) Agree with Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton (2013) and feel unable to dedicate a label or definition for complex sociological inclusion/exclusion. The writers believe it can be experienced differently depending on the affecting factors and circumstances, unique to the affected party. Inclusion as a word, translates to many as 'fitting into something' as an 'equal' (Brodie and Savage, 2015) However, the writers feel this description at times is unattainable due to obvious, impactful inequalities that cannot be fulfilled in certain situations. Brodie and Savage (2015) have concerns that the bigger picture should focus on avoiding exclusion, therefore opening situations wider and not expecting sameness.

Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton (2013) discuss ways to approach sociological situations using the underpinnings of the UNCRC and following the legislation to facilitate the rights of the child, along with reflective practice, observation to identify needs, involvement of family and services and the awareness/perspective of the child themselves.

According to Richter, *et al.* (2017) it is evident through the medium of science that between the ages of conception and three, sociological factors can cause immense damage to the prospects of an individual's life. Likewise, positive, valuable experiences are proven to be beneficial.

The writers felt in 2017, that this age group had been set aside to establish readiness for school. This was perceived as a more superior priority along with basic survival, ahead of addressing pre-school sociological developmental issues. (Richter, *et al.* 2017) However; prior to this in 2016, an advancing study into adverse childhood experiences (known as ACE'S) was carried out by Public Health Wales. The study which researched adults in Wales discovered half of those assessed had endured at least one disadvantageous experience in early life, which had caused an

impact on cognitive ability, low self-esteem, decision making and triggered lifelong difficulties. (Public Health Wales, no date)

Meanwhile, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, Sally Holland believes that the impetus on positioning ACE'S at the core of children's policies in Wales could hypothetically cause some problems. (Holland, S. 2018) One example of her concerns states possible neglect into the social reasoning behind observed patterns of behaviour in children or family members. In this instance, looking closely at the sociological circumstances surrounding the family, and trying to identify and support stressful situations that warrant the development of these behaviours, would harness a more impactful outcome rather than simply identifying and labeling the previous action based aces that appear to reflect on behaviour singularly. (Holland, S. 2018) Holland, (2018) also believes that when labelling ACES there is a danger in children slipping through the net if they have no reported trauma determined to date.

In conclusion, reflecting on a Catalytic approach to leadership involving everyone from children to parents, EYP's, newly qualified practitioners along with multidisciplinary services, seems to enable positive change when built upon in the early years. While sociological factors continue to affect the life and development of children, catalytic leaders can create ways to grow and support learning and development for individuals and their circumstances as they arise. Thus, creating a more flexible and effective setting where staff, families and children feel safe and valued.

## **Section 2 – Children's Commissioner for Wales**

In 1996 an inquiry into the abuse of children in North Wales care homes during the Seventies and Eighties was placed under scrutiny by the then Welsh Secretary, William Hague. (LCCSA, 2012) Mr Hague ordered Sir Ronald Waterhouse, then High Court Judge, to lead the inquiry which Hague described as 'One of the saddest chapters in the history of Social Care'. (LCCSA, 2012)

The inquiry identified case upon case of victims who had been exposed to physical, mental and sexual abuse in their care homes as children. The findings suggested years of traumatic abuse and the possibility of high-profile paedophile rings throughout some areas in question. This was not however confirmed through tribunal hearings. (LCCSA, 2012) Yet according to Macur, (2017) There were accusations against distinguished members of the Conservative Parliament which initiated the investigation. These accusations were alleged to be difficult to substantiate due to lack of victims coming forward to discuss their stories publicly. Macur, 2017)

It was the Waterhouse Inquiry's recommendation to cultivate a role specific to acknowledging the needs and considerations of children and their circumstances. (LCCSA, 2012) This led to the appointment of the first Children's Commissioner

Peter Clarke. (Save The Children, No date) The role was included in the launch of the Care Standards Act 2000 Legislation, which was adapted to combine the recommended position. Thereafter, the role was built upon through the progressive Children's Commissioner Act 2001 which soon filtered through and influenced many parts of the UK and Europe replacing and running alongside ombudspersons and advocates. (Thomas, 2011).

From 1992 the internationally renowned human rights specifications set out by the UNCRC were created to protect the rights of children, defending, and safeguarding their entitlements. (Unicef, No date.) According to Williams, (2005) the UNCRC emphasises the importance of a children's advocate as being fundamental to the support and effectiveness in delivering the standards of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child.

According to Welsh Government, (2022). The role of the Children's Commissioner encompasses the protection of the rights of the child and monitors/informs the legislation and policies put in place to enhance the prospects and outcomes of children and young people. However, Thomas, *et al*, (2010) describe this role and the role of the office for Children's Commissioner as an intimidating one, this due to the constant feed of government and policy given issues to prioritise, along with all concerns from other referral areas. The researchers provide information to suggest that the expectations held for the office of Children's Commissioner, could pose a danger to the outcomes of the service and the dissatisfaction of its service users, unless a highly structured strategy to identify priority needs was firmly in place. (Thomas, *et al*. 2010)

The timeline of catalytic policies set out since 2001 by the 4 Children's Commissioners for Wales to date, have seen publications exploring and educating on topics such as, 'The Whistleblowing Practice Guide' – Peter Clarke in 2004, Child Trafficking, 'Bordering on Concern' – Keith Towler in 2009 and 'The Right Way' and 'Covid and Us' from Sally Holland's contribution between 2015 and 2022. (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023).

The newest Children's Commissioner Rocio Cifuentes was appointed in April 2022. Rocio herself was a refugee who entered Wales from Chile with her parents in the seventies as a small child and was fundamental in the setup of the 'Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team in Wales'. (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023). This background according to Hutt (2022) will bring an equitable perceptiveness which is exactly what is required in these times. (Welsh Government, 2022).

At the news of her appointment Cifuentes, (2022) pledged to commit to making the voices of children, especially in the aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic, and with the steep escalation in household outgoings and inflation (BASW, no date) respected and acknowledged. (Welsh Government, 2022)

The Publication from the Children's Commissioner titled '*Covid and us*' (Holland, 2020) discussed the effects on the child and their family when the Covid-19

pandemic hit Wales with force by March 2020, and the likelihood of this severely impacting children's rights, opportunities and circumstances. (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020) Sally Holland was the Children's Commissioner for Wales at the time of the pandemic and its problematic lockdowns, and researched to complete a report analysing the Welsh Government's critical approach and the approach and responses of the Children's Commissioner's office with regards to Children's Rights in Wales and the safeguarding of all children. (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020)

Welsh Government, (2021) acknowledge that children who faced some of the forementioned sociological disadvantages such as families living in poverty and crisis with insufficient means of income, those who were facing mental health and wellbeing issues, additional needs conditions, and dependence and abuse victims, were already identified as urgently in need. However, following the Covid-19 Pandemic, these families, through the limited support of critical services helping them to manage, became immeasurably more vulnerable. (Welsh Government, 2021) Violence Prevention Unit, (2020), describe the extensity and increase in the areas of abuse at home due to the emergence of circumstantial adversities.

Records show a reduction within the first few weeks of lockdown of referrals to Social Services and Child protection services, the police also disclosed a drop in the number of cases where harm towards a child was reported. (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020) Concerningly, in an Ofsted Report in 2020, Pielman, (2020) claimed abuse was far more likely to go undetected during the pandemic, as those in trusted positions and advocates of children were not on hand to witness physical change or behaviour associations, and raise alarms. (Gov, UK, 2020)

From the moment a lockdown was realised, by order of the Prime Minister, the Children's Commissioner began to establish a plan to safeguard the country's children. This plan aimed to ensure that children and their parents/carers were being educated and updated through reliable sources, were given the opportunities to be involved in the making of decisions unique to their circumstances. To be heard and understood, to share experiences to support others and inform the government of short fallings. (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020) This information is evidenced through an annual report conducted by the Children's Commissioner and responses to recommendations by the Welsh Government. (Welsh Government, 2020)

The strategies put in place by the Government and the Children's Commissioner for Wales are heavily based on the guidance to follow the UNCRC's 11 key factors, shared worldwide to protect the rights of the children during the pandemic, encompassing children's health and wellbeing, social and educational considerations along with access to basic needs such as food, water and sanitisation. The exploration into creativity and culture and the consistent approach to monitor the deliverance of the online curriculum. The development of strong child protection pathways, identifying vulnerable children and families, prevention of restrictive

punishment in light of breaking the strict rules in line with the pandemic, and finally providing a platform where children are able to share views and offer advice in decision making processes. (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020)

The areas that the Welsh Government excelled during the pandemic according to Holland, (2020) were evidenced in the rollout of Free School Meals support via food parcels and direct bank payments, supporting children and families at home. However, as reported by Parnham, *et al*, (2020) Almost fifty percent of children within the United Kingdom were overlooked and failed to receive the support they were entitled to, families in critical need which the writers claimed to find deeply concerning. Alongside this, the accessibility to procure quality, nutritious and standardised food was also being challenged by the pandemics limiting circumstances (McIntyre, *et al*. 2022)

Another major issue identified during covid-19 by the Children's Commissioner of Wales was the decrease in opportunities to play and socialise. (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020) In response to these issues, the Children's Commissioner created videos informing the exploration of utilising private gardens and outdoor space along with ideas to play, keep fit and relax at home. (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020) Shoari, *et al*, (2020) describe the positive action taken by leaders in the US City of Boston, who denied access to vehicles through certain roads and streets during lockdown to enable more space for socially distanced pedestrians, supporting the health and well-being of many thousands of US families.

It was evident especially in the Early Years that the effects from the Country's lockdowns were disturbing. Within the early years, professionals had noticed a decrease in the development of their returning children, socially and emotionally, and physical concerns such as regression in potty training, dexterity, and decreased ability to exercise confidently. (Ofsted, 2020)

ITV (2020) Interview the new Children's Commissioner of Wales, Rocio Cifuentes, Who identifies now more than ever, the value placed upon staff in schools, who will be used as a critical bank of advocates for children's voice following Covid-19 and she pledges to work with these settings across Wales to update and meet the growing needs of each child. (Cifuentes, 2022)

### **Section 3 – Impactive sociological factors**

Digital technology and Media has modified the way people carry out most daily activities. As an example, BBC (2017) reflect upon a time when the weather was only available following the news broadcast at certain intervals through the day. Now. By tapping on an app, the weather is accessible for the next 10 days. (BBC, 2017)

According to AAP (2021) Media in the form of Television, video games, mobile phones and electronics, video streaming sites and sharing platforms, can directly influence the lives of children who experience them, depending on exposure. The overview describes parental concerns regarding the effects of media use on their children's development which is understandable considering the lack of evidence-based research to date. (AAP, 2021)

Similarly, Barr (2019) Agrees that there isn't enough evidence as yet to support whether the usage of media has an impact on the child's development, negative or positive in the early years. However, she believes in earlier research that very young children can develop a better understanding through physical and mental processing of real-world situations. (Barr, 2013) Also Barr (2013) cites AAP, (2011) in earlier publication urging parents and carers to limit media usage in infancy.

Media comes in many forms and is generally accessible to children, young people and adults alike, especially mobile digital media, states Steiner-Adair (2016) The Clinical Psychologist believes that children and young people are already showing preference to sending a text message and avoiding conversation. The concerning factor is that they are not engaging with some crucial socio-emotional techniques, for example understanding a response to what they said or listening profoundly as someone shares. (Steiner-Adair, 2016)

For early years children, the concerns are plentiful and the threats that come with the new digital age aren't going away. However, these can be lessened by varying how the device is utilised, to read a book, to watch an informational story, to draw and create. The duration in which the device is used, and observing the individual child to ensure the best experience possible. (Mustafaoğlu, 2018)

In an Ofcom Report for 2020/2021, research showed 3 to 4 year old children had high levels of internet use recorded, with 92% accessing video sharing platforms such as YouTube regularly, and 90% watching digital on-demand videos and episodes via tablets or mobile devices. Almost half the parents surveyed, felt the positive effects outweighed the negative views towards digital media, and a high number of parents/carers felt they were in control of safety measures. (Ofcom 2021) This being said, the information gathered was critically impacted and altered during the pandemic and lockdown, with parents admitting to relaxing rules and not being as vigilant. (Ofcom, 2021)

Welsh Government (No date) Suggest ways in which to encourage the use of digital media while promoting learning, development and fitness, for example watching clips about different cultures of historical events, or taking a fun dance class from the comfort of their own bedroom.

The new 'Digital strategy for Wales', set out by Welsh Government (2021) expresses the plan to increase confidence and capabilities in digital technology broadly from

early years children to adults throughout the country. Grasping the context of moving with the digital era. (Welsh Government, 2021)

Due to this advancement in digital technology and the immersion into the curriculum, practitioners and service providers now need assistance to ensure quality engagement and provision of reflective learning tools. Providers need to be equipped and prepared to introduce lesson enhancing digital media programmes and be upskilled with regards to policy and rules surrounding the safety and usage of digital technology. (Alelaimat, Ihmeideh, & Alkhawaldeh, 2020).

Karagiannidou (2017) refers to children as digital natives, independently controlling their own learning through personal experience. Practitioners are now aware that children are entering the setting already having gained knowledge and experience in the world of digital technology, due to the accessibility at home. (Karagannidou, 2017) Having this knowledge, some classroom and setting professionals feel ill equipped and lack confidence in attempting to deliver up to date IT programmes. (Alelaimat, Ihmeideh, & Alkhawaldeh, 2020).

To deliver a boost in digital media sessions through the New Curriculum in Wales, some recognised implications could potentially arise in the form of frequent and ongoing staff training, with the constantly updating nature of the digital climate. Expenses to renew tech sources that outdate quickly. Additionally, the ability to assess and monitor outcomes. (Vidal-Hall, Flewitt, and Wyse, 2020)

Ultimately, at the centre of any digital lesson plans or free time, the Welsh Government's advice to follow policy on the Rights of the Child within the digital framework prompts professionals to, ensure the child is only accessing information that they trust and are able to interpret. As well as the right to be safe from harm which yields a new and difficult approach by parents, carers, practitioners and trusted adults, to take responsibility for all accessible content. (Welsh Government. 2022)

To conclude, the approach to delivering a consistent and successful level of digital content in a setting is clearly key in whether it becomes a positive or negative factor in the child's life. It is clear as a key adult, there is a great responsibility to safeguard but there is also evidence and government backing that is advancing into the growing digital age.

Vidal-Hall, Flewitt and Wyse (2020) express the value in not using a 'one size fits all' approach to the delivery of successful digital media lessons within a setting, but instead using a reflective pedagogy, encompassing the environment and learners voice to encourage a more fulfilling experience for pupils and staff, learning through each other and exploration.

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