

ECEY6004 – Inclusive Leadership

Section 1

This section will be based on a critical analysis on the role of an inclusive leader in the context of a particular scenario. Ferdman *et al.* (2021) discuss the importance of inclusion in promoting a successful setting. An inclusive environment nurtures a variety of talents, contributions and positive relationships. Inclusive leadership ensures a workplace with feelings of safety, belonging, participation and opportunities for all voices to be heard. This not only ensures that everyone feels valued and appreciated, but also enables them to share their uniqueness with others within their workplace. Furthermore, this inclusive approach with the staff naturally leads to a respectful and welcoming environment for children and their families.

According to Ferdman *et al.* (2013), inclusive leadership practice is a sign of good leadership, with a particular focus on valuing diversity and ensuring the inclusion of everyone. However, they also state that leadership development is an ongoing process, with a focus on knowing, doing and being in order to secure the best outcomes for all. Furthermore, Hollander (2012) states that inclusive leadership is centred around strong relationships where everyone works together towards shared goals. The book suggests that a good leader would be actively involved with the work of the setting as a strong role model, guiding, supporting and constructively challenging staff as opposed to instructing them. This approach ensures that staff feel that their workplace is fair and that they have a voice which is heard and ideas that are valued.

The scenario discussed relates to a three-year-old girl called Katie. Katie lives with her two mums who she refers to as 'Mummy Liz' and 'Mummy Tash'. Katie was carried by Mummy Liz through IVF but both mums are her legal guardians. Katie's mums do not ever do the school runs together or attend open days which is something that the school is keeping a close eye on; staff are concerned that this could be down to them worrying about either themselves or Katie receiving homophobic abuse. Mummy Tash can often seem very anxious at pick-up time and seems worried when people ask her for information, especially if the member of staff is unfamiliar. It has also become apparent that a few of the other children are curious about Katie's home life. For example, when Katie brought in her chatterbox from home, an approach that is used with new children to develop their confidence by sharing something important to them, staff were concerned by some of the questions asked by the other children. Katie's box contained a photo of her with her mums and two of the children asked, 'Why you got two

mums?’ and ‘Where’s your dad?’. Katie very confidently explained that she did not have a dad and that she has always had her mums. The adult then encouraged discussion around all the different types of families, and the children were very willing to talk about all the different people at home who cared for them. Katie appeared very positive at the end of the discussion and the adult did not feel that the questions from the other children had caused her any distress.

The practitioner’s first step was to share their concerns in the whole staff meeting. This enabled the whole team to share their experiences of working with the family to date and explore strategies that could be put in place to support them. Sales *et al.* (2016) highlight the benefits of collaborative professional development and discussion, with a focus on a distributed approach leading to school improvement. Inclusive leadership fosters this distributed approach, where every member of the team feels able to contribute and these different perspectives lead to a more diverse setting.

However, this approach is not always straightforward; strong differences of opinion can arise often as a result of different cultural, religious or economic backgrounds. Shaban (2016) states that in the twenty first century, managers appear to be becoming more focused on fostering and promoting diversity and acceptance. It is in the best interest of leaders to ensure that this is the case, as without this in place it could lead to conflict, miscommunication as well as a rise in employee turnover. Furthermore, the paper suggests that culturally diverse settings are far more likely to promote innovation, creativity and encourage new ideas. The authors do highlight some potential challenges, for instance, less social cohesion or relational conflict. Yet, if there is an inclusive approach to leadership, a group with more diverse life experiences can lead to more debate, stronger creativity and shared learning which leads to increased performance.

In addition, Booker *et al.* (2016) focus on the training offered to staff on multicultural and diverse perspectives as crucial in order to promote empathy and acceptance; from these sorts of courses comes a sense of community, personal growth, as well as conflict resolution.

However, the availability and quality of this type of training can be very variable and there are significant cost implications for giving all members of staff this opportunity. Schools often have to focus on national agendas or inspection recommendations and equality training is not necessarily prioritised. Clark (2022) discusses the importance of equality training for

minimising discrimination. She also pushes the importance of having an up-to-date equality policy that is followed and implemented which will ensure effective practice.

As a result of the whole staff meeting, Katie's mums were invited into school to discuss her progress and how she had settled into nursery. The practitioner utilised her inclusive leadership skills to make them feel welcome in the setting and share all the positive information about how well Katie was doing in school. According to Whalley (2017), sharing knowledge with parents is a key factor to a child's success. Working together for the benefit of the children is highly beneficial, in particular sharing information with regard to the child's needs and development. Once the parents seemed more comfortable and relaxed, the practitioner then brought up the incident of the other children questioning Katie about the fact she had two mums and how well Katie had responded to them. She then went on to ask their advice on how they would like the staff to support Katie if this type of situation reoccurred. The practitioner adopted the Reggio Emilia approach, which is focused on the importance of working closely with families to ensure inclusion and success for all children (Smith, 2014). Both mums seemed extremely proud of Katie but did say that they worried about the impact of other people's comments on her as she got older. The practitioner listened carefully to their concerns and then suggested some options for encouraging them to be more involved in Katie's educational environment. She particularly focused on the opportunities to attend school open days as a family, sharing a range of experiences and getting to meet other parents and carers. Brown (2019) discusses the power of being inclusive and that an inclusive leader brings the truest form of themselves into the workplace. Additionally, they suggest that through sharing their own vulnerabilities, leaders create a place that enables others to do the same.

Open days are a successful approach for giving families an understanding of what their child experiences on a day-to-day basis. They can also provide them with the opportunity to bring something in that represents their family, such as a speciality dish or craft skill. According to Strieb (2016), involving families in their child's education is valued as an essential element of a child's success in school. It also provides important opportunities for parents and carers to gain new knowledge and insight into different cultural traditions. However, these sorts of occasions need to be carefully managed; some parents may not turn up which can be very disappointing for the child; others may not be very open-minded, knowledgeable or respectful about other families' cultures. Staff need to plan sensitively for dealing with these potential

difficulties. Patrick *et al.* (2012) acknowledge that this is not always a simple or straightforward process, but with time the positive changes begin to become more visible: committed staff, higher levels of satisfaction and overall success.

The meeting with the parents was really successful and emphasised the importance of the family being involved in decisions around their child's education, with the child at the heart of these discussions. According to the UNCRC (no date) article 3; 'The best interest of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children'. Despite this, the UNCRC (no date) also state that the child's own voice must be heard when any decisions are being made. Article 12 states that all children have the right to express their views, for example, by expressing preferences about where or with whom they would like to live. These responses must be taken seriously and acted upon as far as possible (Unicef, no date). However, this can be challenging when working with very young children who might not yet be able to articulate their wants and needs in a way that is understood by adults. Therefore, it is the role of the inclusive leader to explore ways in which the child's voice can be heard effectively. This might include strategies such as observing them in a range of contexts, how they react to different people and situations and using drawings or photographs to help them express simple preferences. Clark (2011) suggests that to gain awareness of young children's concerns, practitioners need to undertake inquiry, utilising child-focused principles. This approach encourages children to narrate, show and tell, take photographs, draw pictures and to be playfully engaged in their learning. This not only allows the practitioner to gain knowledge of the child but also ensures that child's general well-being needs are being met.

Another suggestion from the staff meeting was to think about how the nursery environment reflected the lives of all our school community. Staff discussed whether there were positive images and resources which reflected the social and cultural characteristics of all our families. The staff decided to undertake an audit of the images, toys, books and other resources to ascertain if they would allow all children to see their home environment reflected in the nursery setting. It was agreed that the resources used within enhanced provision were very culturally diverse. However, the resources used within the continuous provision tended to be much more centred around conventional Welsh and British culture, possibly reflecting the cultural experiences of the majority of the staff team. Lindon (2012) discusses cultural diversity in early years settings and how practitioners should promote this through both enhanced and

continuous provision. For example, shared culture can be communicated through food, ways of dressing and music or art forms. Children's family life is central to them building their own identity and it is very important that they see their culture reflected in the setting every day.

The role of the inclusive leader is to adapt the environment to reflect on each child's uniqueness. In terms of Katie, staff decided that they needed to introduce a lot more stories which reflected families with same-sex parents. For example, the picture book 'Heather Has Two Mummies' is very accessible and appropriate for this age group (Walker, 2016). It is based around Heather first starting nursery and explaining to the other children she has two mums. All the children then draw a picture of their families. The message of the story is that all families look very different. Stories have the power to support children to discover their identities, through books that reflect their lives and families. Therefore, practitioners need to ensure that the range and quality of the books and resources which are available throughout the setting are truly reflective of the diverse cultural identities of all their families (Oslick *et al.*, 2015).

According to Naidoo (2012), as recently as the late 1900s it was almost impossible to come across children's books with same sex parents. However, there have been a variety of releases since then and Naidoo suggests that for children to be able to see a representation of themselves in a library or school enables them to feel valued and a sense of belonging. This is also true for parents and carers. When parents see the school using books that reflect their family, they will begin to feel they can trust their child's school or setting. This fosters the building of positive relationships which will ensure the best possible outcomes for the child. However, Lindsay (2014) suggests that the range of children's stories which reflect LGBTQ+ identities is very limited, and that the representation of lesbian characters can be very stereotypical. Stereotyping can have a negative impact on children as it can restrict their ambitions in life, so practitioners need to be mindful of this when selecting appropriate books. Carden (2018) offers strategies to help ensure that parents or carers feel valued, included and respected. These include making sure that the school's policies are accessible, staff are on the playground during drop-offs and pick-ups, and that regular meetings, social events and open days are available for families. They also refer to the importance of sharing information through the school's website, printed notes, social media and particular apps such as SeeSaw in order to form a bridge between the families and the setting.

Ensuring high levels of well-being for every child is a key priority for schools. In light of this, practitioners need to be engaging with parents, carers as well as the wider community in order to achieve maximal levels of well-being (Welsh Government, 2018). They also suggest that when schools and settings welcome mothers, fathers, grandparents and extended family members as an essential part of their children's learning, this is where the best form of meaningful and effective engagement takes place. However, there can be some barriers to promoting diversity due to a lack of understanding and respect for different cultural and lifestyle choices within the community. The school can play an important role in this regard, facilitating community events and creating an inclusive culture and environment which involves children, parents, carers and wider family members (Welsh Government, 2018). Jones *et al.* (2008) discuss the benefits of attending some sort of diversity training course, whether this is formal or informal. These courses would aim to provide different perspectives through a meaningful choice of examples, open discussions and the exploration of particular issues faced by certain groups.

Nevertheless, many parents might not feel confident to come forward if they have experienced homophobic abuse, which is why working in partnership with all families is so important. Many adults feel that they have been let down by their own schools in the past and may be reluctant to confide in practitioners regarding their concerns. It is the role of the inclusive leader to foster trust so that all parents and carers feel able to share any concerns. Under the Equality Act 2010, schools have a duty to eliminate discrimination and advance equality to ensure no one is treated differently because of their race, sexual orientation, sex or religion (Equality Act, 2022).

Raising awareness of diversity within the community is an essential approach that will lead many to become more culturally aware. According to Zumeta *et al.* (2021), raising awareness of the social and cultural backgrounds of others strengthens well-being and group efficiency. This is due to it bringing everyone together as it enables others to see life from different perspectives. However, not all parents or family members will attend events such as multicultural open days, which could be down to being unwilling or may be due to more practical considerations like struggling for childcare. Where schools are experiencing barriers to getting the community on board, the role of the inclusive leader can focus on sourcing and providing training on diversity and inclusion. For example, TalkingTalent (no date) offers a

diversity, equity and inclusion course which could be appropriate for some parents or staff who may struggle to accept difference. Working in partnership with other agencies who have specialist knowledge and expertise in this field is a positive strategy for schools to adopt.

To conclude, from the research undertaken it is evident that many schools and settings are recognising the importance of working closely with families to ensure the most positive outcomes for children. Enabling all practitioners to become inclusive leaders is central to creating an environment where everyone feels that they belong. Practitioners must ensure that the social, cultural, religious and economic backgrounds of all children and families are respected and that all feel welcome in the school and community. Through using inclusive leadership skills to regularly monitor and review the environment, ascertaining the views of all stakeholders, schools can prioritise putting every child at the heart of their provision.

Section 2

The New Curriculum for Wales has become a requirement but also an essential contributor for schools' successes in Wales. However, in this section there will be a critical analysis of Welsh Government (2020) and whether it promotes inclusive leadership within early years sectors or not. According to Baldcock *et al.* (2013), the term policy can carry different meanings, and they emphasise it is important that practitioners are aware of these. They suggest four common elements that a policy covers: belongingness, commitment, status and specificity. These elements combined help to ensure that practitioners feel a sense of ownership of that everyone can work towards shared aims or goals. It also ensures consistency with particular procedures to follow when dealing with problems. These four elements will reflect on how policies and procedures are carried out. Policy is an attempt that is made by leaders who work within organisations to equip everyone with the knowledge and understanding of what is trying to be achieved. Due to the different meanings of policy, Liddicoat (2014) provides the distinctive difference between macro and micro-level policy. Macro-level policies are used for big governmental organisations, whereas micro-level policies are used for smaller local organisations. However, Ferdman *et al.* (2021) suggest that even though organisations have policies and procedures to follow in order to promote inclusion, the likelihood of them being successful depends on how leaders interpret and implement them. Organisations rely on extremely effective leaders to ensure inclusion.

According to Knight *et al.* (2021), The New Curriculum for Wales is now prioritising inclusive education as a key element underpinning research, policy and practice. The curriculum has been adapted in a way that enables all learners to meet their individual goals, in both mainstream and specialist schools. Despite this, the paper also suggests that despite the new reforms having potential for an inclusive education in Wales, there is a lack of consistency for the promotion of diversity. However, this is not to say that Wales has not made significant progress in creating an inclusive education for all. In 2006, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was confirmed, which ensure a commitment to an inclusive education for all. The Convention holds 50 articles, for example article 5 recognises everyone as equal and makes it law to ensure no one is discriminated against (United Nations, no date).

The curriculum has also developed some additional paths for children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). Since 2006 the 'Routes for Learning' has been making a significant difference for children with severe and complex needs. The approach focuses on the children's cognitive development, their communication and social interaction skills as well as their interaction with the environment. This implies that the curriculum is also making important adaptations for all learners, regardless of their needs. In addition, the new curriculum has adopted 'Humanities' as one of the areas of learning and experience, ensuring children become ethical, informed citizens as one of its four core purposes. These elements focus on giving children an understanding of their own and others' heritage, introducing different perspectives to ensure that diversity is recognised and celebrated within and beyond Wales.

In addition, Edwards (2021) discusses some key contributors to the development of the Curriculum for Wales. These include engaging staff in training, working effectively with a range of stakeholders as well as integrating real-life experiences into the curriculum. This all points towards the importance of exposing children from a young age to a range of different individuals and experiences to build on inclusivity and the celebration of diversity. However, there are also some barriers which include lack of training for staff in regard to the design and implementation of the new curriculum, developing partnership working between schools and understanding the link between the curriculum and pedagogy.

Despite all the progress with the New Curriculum in terms of schools and settings offering a more diverse and inclusive environment, there are still barriers and set-backs identified.

Sanchez *et al.* (2018) discuss some of the barriers to an inclusive setting: lack of teacher training, which is essential to be able to respond to the needs of all children. physical barriers, lack of resources and lack of organisation to provide an inclusive curriculum for all. For example, if schools and settings are lacking resources, this means that the learning environment cannot always reflect each child in the setting. There are also concerns around the lack of training for leaders in nurturing and supporting staff to implement the new curriculum as it was intended.

In addition, Schuelka (2018) suggests that although the curriculum is designed to respond to and meet the needs of all learners, in order to make an inclusive education the curriculum must be flexible and accommodative. He encourages flexibility within the curriculum, because if things cannot be changed or adapted it will not provide an inclusive education in schools over time. This approach would necessitate different forms of assessment to take place over time, as well as involving children and practitioners to have a say in the design and planning of the curriculum and learning outcomes.

To conclude, the New Curriculum for Wales (2020) has made some significant developmental changes for enabling a more inclusive education across Wales. The involvement of practitioners and children in developing the curriculum further is creating inclusive and relevant changes for every learner. There are still significant barriers that need to be overcome, such as lack of resources and funding to create a diverse and inclusive environment. It is also apparent that many schools and settings are struggling to offer staff additional training, which could be down to both budgeting and staffing problems. However, inclusive leadership is at the heart of schools being able to make a success of the new curriculum, creating the right culture to ensure that every child feels valued and included.

Section 3 – Blog: How to promote inclusive leadership in an Early Years Setting.

Inclusive leadership is a fundamental aspect of ensuring a successful setting. It fosters an inclusive and welcoming environment where diversity is promoted and celebrated. Siraj-Blachford *et al.* (2014) describe a successful leader as someone who is not only effective and efficient in what they do but they also do it with care. To demonstrate kindness when working with young children, families, educators, teachers, pedagogues and multi-agency professionals builds strong relationships and mutual respect. They suggest that influential leaders empower

others to become leaders. In addition, Ferdman *et al.* (2021) believe it is the role of a leader to act as a catalyst for others to develop inclusive behaviours through role modelling and team-work. Diversity is a broad term and can include gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, age, national background or disabilities. However, it is also about people's personalities, abilities, thinking styles, values and experiences. It is the leader's role to play to everyone's strengths in order to secure a diverse and happy setting.

Promoting inclusive leadership is not always a straightforward and simple process as all members of staff will have different views and values. However, everyone is required to be open-minded and accepting of others in a workplace (Hollander, 2012). In addition, Salmi *et al.* (2020) discuss some approaches to raise awareness of inclusivity such as having inclusion policies and procedures displayed for everyone to see, ensuring children's provision is reflecting diversity and that any form of discrimination is dealt with appropriately. They conclude that policies matter and have the potential to make a significant difference.

For members of staff to be committed to making the environment and provision accessible and appropriate for every child, teachers and practitioners must be given the correct support and advice to do so. Philippa *et al.* (2019) discuss some training options such as professional development but state it is not always straightforward to give all practitioners the opportunities to attend such training. They then go on to explore ways of supporting practitioners to become inclusive leaders; inclusive leadership is fundamental to ensuring that every child and family is valued.

In addition, O' Sullivan (2015) discusses some challenges for leaders when promoting inclusion. The ability to communicate is a key element of inclusion as it builds positive relationships. However, they recognise that it is something many people find challenging. They suggest that the best approach is to prepare, think things through, be authentic, clear and concise. This applies to interactions with staff, families, children and the wider community - working closely with everyone ensures inclusivity.

To conclude, it is evident that there is a lot of research to support the importance of inclusive leadership within the early years sector. However, it is not only the leaders themselves who are responsible for promoting diversity and inclusion, they must also ensure that the whole staff

team are empathetic and welcoming to all. Leaders who are able to lead by example, with kindness and fairness, are in the best place to deliver this agenda.

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