

Inclusive leadership is an active approach to management that aims to ensure individuals feel valued, respected and included, regardless of their differences. Dr Bernardo M. Ferdman, a leadership consultant, professor and researcher, states that practicing inclusive leadership means “bringing inclusion to life” (Ferdman et al., 2021). Ferdman has discussed the concept of inclusion and the need for addressing the complexity of diversity in a productive manner, creating positive and beneficial outcomes. According to Ferdman et al. (2021) inclusive leadership benefits individuals in a plethora of ways, therefore organisations should benefit from using diversity to their advantage, rather than avoiding it. Similarly, Randel et al (2018) discusses the fundamental needs humans seek, defining inclusiveness as the feeling of being valued and an authentic sense of belonging. Furthermore, Randel et al. (2018) argues that the attitudes in which leaders carry have a profound impact on the perceptions of the workforce and the working environment.

Ferdman et al. (2021) highlights a range of leadership behaviours and his views on inclusive leadership provide a detailed framework for leaders to follow in creating inclusive workplaces. Ferdman et al. (2021) emphasises the value of self-awareness, empathy, and empowerment to provide a foundation for leaders aiming for inclusive practice, which can be applied to any type of organisation, whether a business or public service such as a school or early years education setting. Arguably his approach comes with its challenges. Firstly, these behaviours can be considered subjective; therefore, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of this approach to inclusivity when there is a lack of concrete assessment available. Furthermore, the long-term sustainability of such approaches is questionable. Sustaining inclusive practices requires continuous effort and resources, which can be challenging. In an ever-evolving society, leaders are required to continuously stay updated with societal changes and challenges, whilst also ensuring the individuals they are leading are kept informed and appropriately trained. In 2020, when a series of tragic police brutality and racism events outraged the world, the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement grew rapidly within the UK. Arguably, this movement impacted government policy, ignited nationwide debate and a shift in attitudes to systematic racism within British society (Dhaval Dave, 2020).

The correlation between the Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and poverty in the UK and Wales is a complex and layered issue. Various research has revealed that BAME individuals are disproportionately affected by poverty, and this is influenced by numerous socio-economic inequalities, such as institutional racism in education, employment, housing and the criminal justice system. In Wales, the Welsh Government acknowledges the impact of systemic racism and has initiatives aimed at addressing these inequalities, though many challenges remain unsolved. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) consistently show higher poverty rates among BAME communities compared to their white counterparts. For instance, poverty rates among Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities are particularly high, with around half of these populations living in poverty in the UK. Furthermore, in Wales specifically, similar patterns are observed (JRF, 2021). Research carried out by Welsh Government indicates that BAME individuals are more likely to experience poverty and socio-economic deprivation. Studies have found that BAME children are more likely to grow up in poverty and according to the Child Poverty Action Group, nearly half of all BAME children live in poverty in the UK, compared to about one in four white/Caucasian children (CPAG, 2024).

In Wales, educational outcomes for BAME students can be mixed, with some groups achieving less favourable results compared to their peers. Unfortunately, this goes on to impact career prospects and opportunities, bringing further disparity to the workplace. Furthermore, BAME individuals often face higher unemployment rates, lower wages and underemployment. Research shows discrimination in hiring practices, lack of opportunities for career progression, and occupational segregation contribute to these disparities. In Wales, employment rates for BAME individuals are also lower, and those who are employed often work in lower-paid and less secure jobs. The UK government has various initiatives aimed at reducing poverty and promoting equality, such as the Race Disparity Audit. However, the effectiveness of this initiative. Research critics have suggested that the RDA suggested that racism may be a cause of influence in socio-economic disparities and arguably has contributed to discrediting anti-racism as a solution in ensuring a more inclusive and fairer society (Smith, H.J. 2023).

The Welsh Government's Strategic Equality Plan and Race Equality Action Plan aim to address these disparities through targeted interventions, with the goal of Wales becoming entirely 'Anti-Racist' by 2030 (Welsh Government B, 2022). In 2021, as a proactive response by the education system in Wales, the Welsh Government introduced Black, Asian and minority history as a mandatory topic of learning to the new curriculum for Wales being taught in schools; stating that "black history is Welsh history" (Welsh Government A, 2022). This aims to provide a more inclusive education and foster a better understanding of different cultures and Wales is the first country in the UK to pave the way in this specific area of inclusive learning (Welsh Government A, 2022).

Scenario. Based in private nursery setting.

A female same sex couple bring their child along to a private nursery settling in session for the first time, before their child starts attending full time after half term. The parents mention facing discrimination in the past when their eldest child attended another local nursery so are keen to find a nursery that is LGBTQ+ affirming. When the parents and child arrive, they see a LGBTQIA+ sticker on the main entrance door and are greeted by a friendly childcare practitioner, who offers them refreshments and a welcome pack upon entry. The parents notice that the practitioner is wearing a LGBTQ+ lanyard, indicating allyship. It is June at the time of their visit and the nursery has a pride month display in the hallway, with photos of rainbow activities and a pride "love is love" party the children and staff had celebrated with. When having a tour around the nursery room areas, the children's 'reading garden' area have a diverse selection of story books, which include same sex parent families and books with characters that are adopted. The manager of the nursery has a warm and friendly approach. During their conversations, one mother shares that she has autism, and their child is showing autistic traits, which is causing them concern. The manager chats openly, sharing advice on where to seek support. The parents also learn that the female manager has a wife and children herself.

Inclusive leadership in this nursery is evident through multiple deliberate actions and symbols of support for the LGBTQIA+ community. Firstly, the LGBTQIA+ sticker on

the main entrance door and the practitioner's LGBTQIA+ allyship lanyard are powerful visual affirmations of the nursery's commitment to inclusivity. These symbols signal to the parents and child that the nursery is a safe and welcoming space. The initial greeting by a friendly childcare practitioner set a positive and welcoming tone. The presence of a Pride month display with photos of rainbow activities and celebrations further reinforces an inclusive atmosphere. It was clear that there were diverse educational resources available in the nursery, with the nursery's reading garden area including a diverse selection of storybooks. This not only supports inclusivity but also provides representation and validation for all children from various family structures. The nursery manager's warm and friendly demeanour, along with her openness about her own family structure, works positively in enhancing the trust and comfort of the visiting parents.

This scenario clearly illustrates various practices of inclusive leadership. By prominently displaying LGBTQIA+ symbols and including diverse educational materials, the nursery ensures that inclusivity is both seen and experienced by staff, children and families. Furthermore, the welcoming atmosphere and open conversations with the manager demonstrate an environment where communication is important and where families feel heard and valued, also indicating that staff working in the setting receive an equally positive level of communication. The manager's willingness to provide the parents with advice on autism support, shows a proactive approach to addressing individual needs and concerns. Moreover, also showing that the manager is knowledgeable in how to support other forms of diversity, such as additional learning needs.

Exposure to diverse family structures and inclusive educational materials fosters an environment of acceptance and understanding. Children learn to respect differences and see diversity as a norm, promoting their social and emotional development (Eaude, T. 2020).

For the same-sex couple, seeing visible symbols of allyship and inclusivity significantly reduces anxiety and builds trust in the nursery's ability to provide a safe space for their child. The friendly and supportive interactions with staff, particularly the manager's openness about her own same-sex family, provide reassurance and a

sense of community. Furthermore, the staff members working in such an inclusive environment are likely to feel more valued and supported, knowing that the nursery's leadership practices align with values of diversity and inclusion. This can improve job satisfaction, relationships within the team and overall workplace morale. On a broader scale, these positive attitudes to inclusion have a ripple effect in the wider community, encouraging conversations and shifts in attitudes. Collaboratively, this positively influences a community approach to ensuring LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

Whilst the scenario demonstrates strong inclusive leadership, there are potential negatives and areas for improvement. Firstly, the visible symbols of inclusivity (LGBTQIA+ stickers, lanyards and Pride displays) are important but may come off as superficial if not supported by deeper and sustained actions. There is a risk that inclusivity may appear tokenistic if not embedded in everyday practices and nursery policies. When there is such a reliance on visible symbols, the need for ongoing education and training for staff could be overshadowed. Inclusivity should go beyond visual representation to ensure staff understand and can appropriately address the unique needs of diverse families. Furthermore, although the manager provided some advice on autism support, it is not clear on whether the nursery has specific resources or training in place to support children with Additional Learning Needs. This could lead to parents feeling uncertain about the nursery's capability to meet their child's needs. Moreover, although the nursery has a selection of inclusive resources such as the story books, it is important to consider whether these are being used appropriately, if at all. Many settings have great resources, however if staff aren't appropriately trained in how to use resources, the children cannot benefit from them.

Going forward, the nursery leaders should implement ongoing training for staff on diversity and inclusion, to ensure they are equipped to support all children and families effectively. This includes training on Additional learning needs, anti-racism practice and LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Research has shown that leaders within education often have not gained valuable training on inclusion during their initial training, therefore they must actively pursue more knowledge and understanding on the matter (Karlsudd, P. 2021).

Furthermore, leaders should communicate clear policies that reflect their commitment to inclusivity. These policies should cover anti-discrimination, accommodation for additional needs and support for diverse family structures. To adhere with the Care Inspectorate Wales guidance, nursery policies should be accessible to both the staff and families of the nursery. The nursery policies should appropriately reflect current society and government legislation, therefore, should be kept updated at minimum once a year, however quality practice would require more frequent updates (CIW, 2023).

Although this scenario highlights LGBTQIA+ inclusivity, there is no mention of other forms of diversity, such as racial, cultural and economic. For inclusive leadership to be entirely effective, a well-rounded inclusive approach to all forms of diversity is necessary to ensure all children and families feel a sense of belongingness and support (Karlsudd, P. 2021).

If a nursery celebrates Pride month but does not acknowledge and celebrate Diwali and black history month, then arguably, the nursery is failing to practice inclusive leadership. Going forward, leaders should encourage open dialogue about inclusivity and diversity amongst staff, children, and parents. Leaders can create opportunities for experiences and ideas can be shared, whether through meetings, questionnaires or open day events. This enables a culture of continuous reflection of practice, learning and improvement. Furthermore, leaders can organise events and activities that celebrate various aspects of diversity, involving families and the wider nursery community. This can help build a more inclusive community and provide opportunities for parents to share their experiences and needs. It is beneficial for leaders to establish partnerships with local organisations that can provide specialist training and support, for various areas of diversity, including organisations such as Stonewall (Stonewall, 2024), Pride Cymru (Pride, 2024) and Snap Cymru (Snap Cymru, 2024).

Where appropriate, in collaboration with parents, carers and in some cases, multiagency teams, leaders should provide support plans for children and ensure staff are trained to implement these plans effectively. Moreover, leaders should regularly assess the effectiveness of inclusivity initiatives through feedback from

parents, children, and staff. This feedback can be used to make continuous improvements and ensure that the nursery practices remain genuinely supportive, leading with authentic, empathy-based inclusivity (Nakamura et al., 2022).

In 1969, the UK Government signed the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. This convention requires that the Government are legally required to cease discrimination and actively put legislation in place to achieve this. The main criticism of this convention is that it doesn't specifically suggest how this complex and deeply layered issue can be eradicated. Arguably, this continues to leave the question nearly fifty-five years later, can total eradication of racial discrimination really be achieved? (UN, 2018).

The UK has enacted several key pieces of legislation aimed at promoting equality and combating racism. The Equality Act 2010 is a fundamental piece of legislation, strengthening previous anti-discrimination laws and providing a framework to protect individuals against discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other characteristics. Education settings and non-maintained nursery settings are legally obliged to adhere to this Act (UK Government, 2010).

The Act does however come with its limitations. Arguably, The Equality Act 2010 does not adequately address the complex realities of intersectional discrimination, where individuals face discrimination based on multiple intersecting characteristics; for example, the correlation between Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) individuals and poverty. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) two out of ten BAME individuals are living in poverty in the UK, which is double the number of white individuals living in poverty. Furthermore, BAME individuals who are employed are more likely to experience homelessness than white individuals who are employed. Moreover, research has shown that BAME individuals are less likely to inherit wealth, having a knock-on effect on their ability to purchase housing and join the homeowner property market. Arguably, the UK Government policies on immigration have had a detrimental effect on the treatment BAME individuals, many being more likely to face outright discrimination in the housing rental market, causing difficulty in finding affordable housing to meet their needs (JRF, 2021).

The legal framework tends to treat each characteristic in isolation, which is not realistic for how discrimination presents itself in 'real life'. Although the Equality Act 2010 provides a legal framework, major shifts in British culture and overall attitudes are required to effectively combat discrimination. Legislation alone cannot change deep-seated societal prejudice. Arguably, issues like microaggressions, unconscious bias, and bullying in the workplace continue to affect marginalised groups (Butcher, 2022).

Furthermore, Wales has specific commitments through the Welsh Government's Strategic Equality Plan, which demonstrates a commitment to promoting equality and aiming to tackle discrimination across all public services, including education. The goals and objectives of the plan are aligned with legal requirements under The Equality Act 2010. The Strategic Equality Plan emphasises the importance of inclusive leadership, recognising that leaders play a critical role in shaping an inclusive culture within educational settings. The plan sets out ambitious goals to reduce inequalities and improve outcomes for all learners. Including specific measures to support marginalised and underrepresented groups, such as ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Much like other Government policies, although the plan highlights the importance of inclusive leadership, it sometimes lacks detailed guidance on how to achieve this in practice within schools and other educational settings (Welsh Government, 2020).

The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is an innovative piece of legislation which aims to ensure leaders in Wales are considering the long-term impact of their decisions, encouraging public bodies to work better with people, communities, and each other and to aim to prevent problems and take a more combined approach. It includes goals related to a more equal Wales, aiming to build a society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter their background or circumstances (Welsh Government, 2015). This Act outlines seven well-being goals that are arguably very broad and somewhat vague. This vagueness can lead to various interpretations and implementations across different public bodies which can lead to inconsistency. The Act's broad focus might overlook the socioeconomic factors that affect children and families in Wales. Specific strategies to address

inequalities, such as targeted support for low-income families or marginalised communities are highly important, however are not explicitly detailed in the Act. Furthermore, although the Act promotes general well-being, it does not provide specific and actionable plans for children and their families. Unfortunately, generalisations can result in inaccuracy and a lack of focus on crucial areas like child poverty and early childhood education (Nutbrown, 2023).

To be successful, The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires collaboration across various public bodies in Wales. According to research, without clear guidelines and adequate resources, this can lead to ineffective efforts that fail to address the complex issues faced by children and families. Achieving the goals of the Act requires investment. However, particularly in the current cost of living economic crisis in the UK, the limited funding and access to resources can hinder the ability to implement important initiatives. This is particularly relevant for education and support services, where underfunding can lead to inadequate support for schools, educators, non-profit support organisations and early years settings (Davies, 2017).

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 is another significant piece of legislation aimed at enhancing the well-being of people who need care and support within Wales. This Act aims to transform the way social services are delivered, promoting the well-being of people who need care and support and their carers. It emphasises the importance of involving individuals in decisions about their care and support and therefore aims to promote equality and inclusion. Despite its intentions, similar to The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, this Act also has somewhat vague language used throughout. Open ended phrases such as 'as far as reasonably practicable' and 'have regard' are used, lacking specific and detailed guidance. Again, this can lead to varied interpretations and inconsistent implementation across different local authorities (UK Government, 2014).

Furthermore, the Act emphasises collaboration across social services but may not fully integrate with the education sector. Schools play a critical role in the well-being and holistic development of children; however, the Act does not provide a clear framework for how educational settings should collaborate with social services to

support children. Moreover, much like other legislations, although the Act advocates for early intervention, the practicalities of this can be limited by lack resources and lack of coordination among services. This is generally due to Government funding, which is a much larger issue and often out of the control of social services. This can result in reactive rather than proactive support for children and families. An example of a reactive action would be children needing to be removed from their families and being placed into foster care. Due to the lack of parental support for struggling families, more children are being put at risk of compromised health and well-being (Carol et al., 2018). Arguably, if there was adequate Government funding available for social services to provide quality support programmes for parents and families, there would be a positive improvement in Wales, meaning a significantly lower number of children would need to access foster care.

In conclusion, though each legislation has limitations and arguably, areas for improvement, by embedding these frameworks into leadership practices, organisations in Wales are positively moving towards ensuring they are promoting inclusivity, equality, and respect for all individuals, which is more reflective of the diverse society in which they operate.

Blog



Photo (Amy Curnock, 2024).

Inclusivity for the LGBTQIA+ community in early years settings and education, involves recognising and valuing diverse family structures and identities. It is about creating environments where children can see themselves and their families reflected positively, ensuring that all children develop a sense of self-worth and respect for others. Early years settings should ensure that their policies explicitly include protections for LGBTQ+ children and families, who are more likely to experience prejudice. This includes anti-bullying policies, equal opportunities policies, and guidelines for respecting diverse family structures (CIW, 2023).

Leadership should ensure they use inclusive language in all communications. For example, use terms like "grown-ups" or "parents" when referring to family and carers. When practitioners and educators use this inclusive language, they are also role modelling appropriate language for young children to use with their peers, contributing to eradicating heteronormative assumptions from a young age.

For childcare practitioners to be equipped to use inclusive practice, they should have regular training on LGBTQIA+ issues, including understanding diverse identities, addressing bias and creating inclusive environments. Training can help childcare staff feel more confident and knowledgeable in supporting LGBTQ+ children and families (Stonewall, 2023).

As part of the Curriculum for Wales and funded non-maintained curriculum, LGBTQIA+ themes and diverse family structures should be incorporated within learning experiences. This can be done through books, activities, and learning discussions that reflect the diversity of families and identities. Practitioners can organise events and activities that celebrate diversity, including LGBTQIA+ identities. Celebrating events like Pride Month or LGBTQIA+ History Month can raise awareness and promote acceptance. Practitioners can use resources and materials that include positive representations of LGBTQIA+ individuals and families. Books where there are same-sex couples and transgender characters challenge the heteronormative narrative, encouraging children to share their experiences and learn about different cultures and identities through storytelling, expressive arts and play (Welsh Government C, 2022).

Educators should discourage gender stereotypes and binary ideas. If a boy would like to wear dresses and play with traditionally more stereotypically 'girl' toys, they should be allowed without question. This attitude encourages openness, moves away from limiting gender binary ideas and ultimately, encourages children to freely explore their interests (Martinez-Bello, et al. 2023).

Leaders should actively build strong relationships with LGBTQIA+ families and ensure they feel included and respected. This could be done by inviting families to share their experiences and participate in school activities. Furthermore, leaders should provide resources and support for families, such as information about LGBTQIA+ community organisations and support services in Wales. Organisations like Stonewall Cymru are beneficial to work collaboratively with, as they offer valuable resources, providing guidance and specific training on creating inclusive environments. Moreover, leaders can remain informed about best practices and current issues affecting the LGBTQIA+ community through engagement with these external advocacy communities (Stonewall, 2024).

Unfortunately, promoting LGBTQIA+ inclusivity can come with challenges and has become quite a controversial topic within the early years and education sector in recent years. Historically, there has been resistance from educators, families and even individuals in positions of Government power. Afterall, gay marriage has only been legal in the UK for ten years and is still a criminal offence in many parts of the world. Misconceptions and ignorance can be fuelled by cultural and religious differences, or a lack of awareness and training. Although the UK has moved forward, there is much work to be done, particularly in transgender rights and the protection of transgender youth (Lawrence, M and Taylor, Y. 2020).

To enable full inclusive leadership, it is not adequate to simply be 'not homophobic'. It is an essential obligation for organisations to lead with anti-homophobic practice, to actively move away from heteronormativity and bring visibility to the LGBTQIA+ community, a minority group who are often made victims of prejudice and discrimination across the world, consequently, being kept in a somewhat invisible box.

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