

Inclusive leadership: Working together to support families.

Introduction.

In this essay I will critically evaluate the role of inclusive leadership with children, families, professionals, and communities.

According to Shore and Chung (2021) inclusive leadership is a new phenomenon and is only recently being researched, therefore they believe that there is often confusion with leaders on the meaning of inclusion. Thompson (2017) defines inclusion as allowing people from diverse backgrounds, have unique ways of thinking or have different characteristics to work together effectively to fulfil their true potentials.

It is believed that one of the reasons for inclusive leadership is to motivate people. Those from diversified backgrounds can benefit greatly from inclusive leadership, and it can also have a positive influence on not only individuals' performances, but also organizations. However, it is suggested that inclusive leaders must be mindful that diversity includes underlying levels of social cognition and values, not just factors such as age, living status and gender, and should ensure they do everything possible to meet these individual challenges (Li and Tang, 2022; Wulffi, 2016, p. 57-131). Moreover, Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2016), argues that often in educational settings, inclusion is seen as a need that mainly children with additional learning needs and disabilities require. However, inclusive leaders must recognise and appreciate the differences in everyone, regardless of backgrounds (Mosseau, N.D).

In order to be an inclusive leader and practice inclusive leadership, leaders should adopt an intersectional approach to ensure everyone has the same opportunities, regardless of the backgrounds they come from. The term Intersectionality is used when aspects from a person's identity, such as race, sex or religion for example, combines to create multiple and different forms of disadvantages (NHS England, 2021). Nesom (2018) agrees and believes that intersectionality is the combination of socially constructed categories that result in the different levels of disadvantages. According to Bagalini (2020), intersectionality in the workplace should come as a top-down approach and leaders need to be mindful of their own unconscious bias. However, according to Scottish Government (2022) Intersectionality is not used in everyday life at the moment as it is a relatively new concept to inclusive leadership. They do however argue that awareness around intersectionality is beginning to grow in policymaking and academic contexts. Scottish Government (2022) however, also emphasises that it is essential that intersectionality is clearly defined and understood before it is applied to policymaking.

According to Roberson and Perry (2022) researchers see inclusive leadership as creating the experience of feeling a sense of belonging within an organisation or a team and provides people with a sense of uniqueness. Ferdman (2021, p.3) agrees with Roberson and Perry, and suggests

that to be an inclusive leader is to foster fairness and equity across a range of identities. Inclusivity is to value everyone and their unique identities, without them having to hide their true self.

It is Conn and Davis (2023) that argue that sometimes, inclusion and its policies can often draw attention to and label children and families that may describe them as a deficit, and assume that they should be the focus of learning and development. They suggest without the right understanding this could construct and divide certain groups. However, Bourke and Titus (2019) argue that by simply combining a variety of diverse people will not always ensure inclusive environments with positive outcomes. They suggest that by ensuring everyone feels valued, treated fairly and respectfully and have a sense of belonging, leaders are promoting inclusive leadership.

Welsh Government (2023) suggest that when early years settings promote belonging, also known as 'Cynhefin' in Wales, it can help children feel safe, happy and begin to understand who they are as a person and how they fit into the world around them. Inclusive leaders who promote belonging also helps to build positive relationships between not just themselves and the children, but also the children's families and the wider communities.

Ferdman and Deane (2014, p. 177) suggest that in order to be a successful inclusive leader, practitioners must first learn to decentralise themselves and become more flexible, as opposed to following a hierarchical structure. It is believed that to achieve inclusive leadership within early years settings, practitioners are encouraged to put the children in the settings at the centre of all practice and provision (Hallet, 2021, p. 3-6; UNCRC, N.D).

Gerritsen (2020, p. 3) suggests that while inclusion has many benefits, he agrees with Shore and Chung (2021) and says that a barrier to inclusive leadership can be due to the lack of literature available and its underexposure, there is little shared vision or knowledge available for leaders to work together. However, Woodcock and Woolfson (2019, p. 232-242) argue that another barrier to inclusive leadership can be the attitudes of practitioners and their unwillingness to practice inclusive strategies within the settings. Moreover, Ahmed *et al* (2020) suggests that when settings promote inclusive leadership, the environment is open and accessible to everyone, regardless of their backgrounds. This style of leadership within settings promotes safety, provides space for both children and their families to share their worries and in turn reduces stress.

Scenario.

Recently a Ukrainian refugee family moved into the local area. This family has 6 children between them and have recently began attending a Welsh speaking setting. These children have minimal English and zero Welsh. The younger children are finding it hard to engage with other children and practitioners in the setting, and do not engage in play with the toys nor the Welsh resources. It is noticeable that two staff members are not speaking English to these children, and during activities

such as story time they are only using Welsh resources. The older 2 children of the family have more understanding of the English language and do engage slightly better, but are now spending a lot of time trying to regulate their younger siblings or translating for them. Practitioners are also having to rely on the older children quite often to relay messages back and forth between the setting and mother, due to the language barriers. It is believed that the language barriers are the main cause of no rapport with Mum. It is now also becoming apparent that mum engages with no one on the yard, and reports have begun coming in regarding some of the unkind things that some other parents and members of the community are saying with regards to this family moving into the area.

Children and families.

There are many issues in this scenario that relate to children and their families. They are undoubtedly experiencing intersectionality as they are suffering from multiple disadvantages (NHS England, 2021). The children and their families have been forced to flee their homes due to the on-going war and find refuge in foreign countries such as Wales. They have lost connection to their communities, schools and families. Based on the findings of Ruggeri (2024), children who live through and suffer the effects of war, although they show true resilience, they also show that certain types of trauma that is experienced through childhood has the potential to rewire their nervous systems, which in turn can alter the path of their development. Not only is it evident that they have experienced a large amount of trauma, but they are also now faced with having to attend Welsh speaking settings. The children and their families are now living in communities and are attending schools where they are not fully able to even understand the language that is spoken.

Strishenets (2024) believes that these children and their families have suffered immeasurable trauma and are most vulnerable and suggests that protection of these children should be at the highest priority. Although the older children have slightly better English than the younger children, they are also at a disadvantage as they are unable to fully enjoy their own experience as they are having to support their younger siblings, therefore their learning is suffering. If the younger children felt more supported, and safer within setting, and if all practitioners were more inclusive and understanding of their specific needs then this could help them to form relationships with them, who are then able to regulate them, allowing the older children to enjoy their own experiences and not having to provide constant support to their younger siblings. In turn the younger children would feel nurtured and worry free, which can then form engagement and belonging (Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2021).

Cerys (2023) suggests that children who are immersed and heavily supported in learning a language and have intense immersive teaching can learn the language very quickly. While Cerys

(2022) said that with inclusive, immersive approaches such as immersive units, it can show positive results with children and their families in as little as 11 weeks if they have these opportunities. By acknowledging that these children and their families require additional support strategies such as these, leaders will be exercising inclusive leadership. NAHT Cymru (N.D) argues however, that almost nine out of ten schools across Wales are now having to make savings across their schools due to the recent budget cuts. Schools are claiming they are unable to offer salary rises, while others are suggesting spending less on children who require additional support. With Senedd Cymru (2023) describing the funding cuts as one of the hardest due to the highest rates of inflation in forty years. With this in mind and the fact that unfortunately, there are only eight Welsh immersive units within local authority areas across Wales (Welsh Government, 2021), it may cause a barrier the children and their families accessing this inclusive provision.

Professionals and communities.

The professionals and communities also play a large role in this scenario. It is obvious that the younger children are finding it hard to engage with other children and practitioners in the setting. The two practitioners are not making this situation any easier for these children by purposefully not speaking English to these children. There may be many reasons for this, Velykonda *et al* (2023) suggests that the work loads of practitioners now have increased immensely, the practitioners in this scenario could be frustrated by this and although this behaviour is not acceptable, could be the reason why they are acting so unprofessionally.

Due to the setting not having any Ukrainian resources this creates a barrier to children's learning and development. According to the Department of Education (2024) children with English as an additional language should have the opportunity to speak their home language. In order to support achievements in learning and well-being, resources in their own language should be available and kept consistent. The Welsh Government (2022a) argue that it is the responsibilities of settings in Wales to offer the same high-quality education to children from Ukraine as they do to the existing children within the settings, therefore by refusing to speak any other language than Welsh they are not complying with the Welsh Governments standards. It is clear that these practitioners are not being inclusive leaders by acting this way. Practitioner training to support Ukrainian children's education is clearly needed in this situation. New Directions (2022) states that by placing practitioners who can speak the home language of these children can provide them with the best possible outcomes, this links with Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1979), where he suggests working together with a range of organisations will be beneficial to the child's development.

Practitioners are encouraged to decentralise themselves working with Ukrainian children and their families. Inclusive leadership requires practitioners to step out of their comfort zones and take on

the role of being the individual in question. This was clearly not being done with the practitioners who were refusing to speak English to the children in this scenario. Mattar (2024) argues that decentralisation suits younger learners now and if leaders take away the power from standard people in charge, such as the government and learning authorities, and give it to the teachers and those working directly with children, it can have a positive effect on them. For example, if teachers and teaching assistants practice inclusive approaches such as building curriculums from the “bottom up” with an abundance of Ukrainian resources, with time for transition this can help the children and their families thrive within settings.

Inclusive approaches can be used from the very start, City of Sanctuary (2022) suggest that during the admission process and the early days of their educational journey’s practitioners could invite the children and their families into the setting, so they are able to familiarise themselves with staff and the setting itself. As explained by Birth to 5 matters (N.D) and supported by UNCRC (N.D), practitioners should put the child at the centre of their focus when using inclusive approaches. Referring to Birth to 5 matters (N.D), they believe that by developing the environments so that children and their families are reflected through it and also developing awareness from first-hand experiences, it can have a profound impact on children and their families and promote inclusive leadership and quality care and education.

Unfortunately, it is the lack of knowledge and understanding of some other parents in the community are causing some unkind behaviours to happen on the school yard. This behaviour is having an effect on the mother who is clearly feeling isolated and always standing alone. Welsh Government (2016) believe that an inclusive approach involving families and communities can have a greater impact on children’s learning. They also argue that when practitioners work with families and the wider community it can bridge the gap between them, regardless of their backgrounds and give them an insight on understanding each other. Baker *et al* (2018) suggest that families and communities are not involved as much as they should be with their children’s education, causing an impact on the relationships with other families and the school itself. They suggest that by inviting families in the school building, improving communication, and providing opportunities such as weekend activities and after school clubs, this can help with building healthier relationships with each other. However, they do argue that a barrier to this could be family work schedules and also parents comfort levels with the school. If parents had their own negative experiences in school, this could pose as a barrier for them creating healthy relationships with their children’s school.

In conclusion, inclusive leadership is a new concept in education and is only being researched recently, they suggest that there can be confusion with the meaning of inclusion (Shore and Chung, 2021). Another definition for inclusion is allowing people from diverse backgrounds, who have unique ways of thinking and have different characteristics, to work together effectively to

achieve their full potentials (Thompson, 2017). While Woodcock and Woolfson (2019, pp. 232-242) argue that practitioner's unwillingness to practice inclusive strategies within the settings and their attitudes towards it can be a barrier to inclusive leadership. Ferdman and Deane (2014, p. 177) believe that to foster inclusive approaches, leaders should learn to decentralise themselves and to not always follow a hierarchical structure, flexibility and taking the power away from those in charge will create a more understanding and inclusive environment. Intersectionality is another aspect leaders should be aware of when promoting inclusivity, intersectionality is the term used when aspects from a person's identity combines to create multiple forms of disadvantages (NHS England, 2021). Inclusive approaches include not just children, but their families, practitioners and the wider communities.

There are many that argue however, the barriers that can become apparent here is when families and communities are reluctant to engage due to their own experiences with schools and work schedules (Baker *et al*, 2018). While others suggest that when schools work with immersive units and other agencies it helps to support inclusive leadership. However, funding is now at a worrying state and these provisions may not be available to everyone, thus making inclusive leadership difficult to maintain (Senedd Cymru, 2023; NAHT Cymru, N.D).

Policies and guidelines in Wales.

According to The British Ecological Society (2017) there are principles that are set out in order to achieve a specific goal. A government policy is known as a Macro policy, while a micro policy is a personalised policy for a specific setting (Royal Academy of Engineering, 2022). Having set policies can ensure that standards, cultures and values are all outlined a clearly understood. However, it is argued that lack of motivation, lack of time, and lack of funding can be a barrier to policies (Rethore, 2021; Nathan *et al*, 2018). Ferdman, Prime and Riggio (2020, p. 15-17) argue that it is policies and organizational goals related to inclusion that play a vital role in everyday interactions and behaviours. They suggest that it is the patterns and behaviours at micro-levels that inclusive leaders must highlight and note, to be able to feed into macro-levels, bringing them to life at higher organizational levels.

Conn and Hutt (2020) believe that it is educators that are viewed as the experts in education, and they are the ones who can implement real change. This is reflected in the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (2022) which is part of the new Curriculum for Wales and was co-created by practitioners for practitioners. This curriculum is a macro guideline that draws on the expertise and viewpoints of practitioners that are in the early years and child education sector (Welsh Government, 2022). This document is clearly laid out and is simple to read, with appropriate language for practitioners and parents to understand. Within the document there are pictures that link to specific areas of learning so that it is clear what is expected within the new

curriculum, before reading. According to Monmouthshire County council (2024) The Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings allows children to be at the centre of their own learning, this adopts the requirements of the UNCRC's (N.D) article 3, where children should be at the heart of all decisions.

However, while this document is easy to read and effective to the development of children, it is not mandatory to follow. According to Welsh Government (2022b) this curriculum is for nursery settings to adopt if they wish to. This then poses the risk for not all nursery settings to follow, causing settings to not be as inclusive and understanding to children and their families, compared to the settings that do follow it. Reports from the Welsh Language Commissioner (2022) also contradict Welsh Governments (2022b) advice where settings can adopt the curriculum if they wish to, as they suggest that the curriculum expects all settings to develop the Welsh language within its setting. The results from settings with regards to this consultation response is not a true reflection on all settings, as not all settings are expected to follow the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings.

This new curriculum and its focus on inclusive approaches and how every child develops at their own pace, links to Ferdman's (2017) research where settings should foster equality across the dimensions of a child's true identity. Ferdman (2017) also emphasises inclusion and the sense of belonging, one of the five developmental pathways of the new curriculum for funded non-maintained settings to ensure children understand who they are and what role they play in the world.

When you compare micro-level policies and guidelines such as the document for the curriculum for funded non-maintained settings, with macro-level policies such as the 'Education Act 201' it is clear to see that even at a first glance it is further away from the participation of educators like the curriculum for funded non-maintained settings was. This Macro policy is not as easy to read a micro policy and is harder to follow with the language that is used. For example, **"Part 1 of the Childcare Act 2006 (functions of local authorities in England in relation to childcare) is amended as set out in subsections (2) and (3)" (Education Act, 2011, Section 1)**. This has not been co-created or constructed with relationships of families and educators in mind. It is difficult to take the information in this legislation when reading it, which creates a barrier to inclusive leaderships. A common barrier to inclusion with the reading of these complex legislations is those with dyslexia. Moojen *et al* (2019) suggest that despite other research suggesting that adults with dyslexia do not always have a reading impairment, their studies show that there often are and are all at varied levels.

When referring to Ferdman's (2020) system of inclusion framework, it is evident that societies macro level of inclusion policies are far from the experience of the individuals involved. These legislations and acts of parliament are not co-created with day-to-day people, especially those from diverse backgrounds in mind, with the language that is used. They also do not take into consideration that many readers may not understand what is meant by these sections and subsections and the words that are used may be ambiguous. It is suggested by The Cabinet Office (2013), that while the digital age has made finding specific laws easier, readers can often feel overwhelmed trying to read it. Its users have described it as intimidating and intricate.

Capacity development (2014) argues that to overcome these barriers local organisations such as local authorities could train in operational policy issues. They also suggest governments and higher stakeholders should work with and assist those lower organisations such as learning authorities, in order to gain more of a perspective from those who are at the forefront of these policies. When all organisations are working together with those who these policies are written for, it makes links to Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1979). Research by Antony (2022) suggests that Bronfenbrenner's framework holds the individual at the centre of its work, with the microsystems being close relationships with those who can directly impact the child, working outwards towards the macrosystems. This framework is similar to Ferdman's (2014) inclusion model, where again the individual, who is the child in this instance is at the centre, and working outwards from the people who have the initial impact on them at micro levels, eventually ending with those at micro levels, such as governments inclusive policies and guidelines.

In conclusion it is micro level inclusion policies that are usually written with families and the children that it directly effects, in mind. They are often easier to read and understand, however the wording and expectations can be misinterpreted (UNCRC, N.D; Welsh Government, 2022b), While macro-level inclusion policies can often be harder to read due to the ambiguous language that is often used. These policies that are written at the macro-levels are clearly written by those who are not initially impacting on these children and their families, and although now all documents can be accessed digitally, they are still intimidating to read, especially in the cases of those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia (The Cabinet office, 2013). In order to overcome barriers such as these, theorists' frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Ferdman's (2014) inclusion model should be taken into consideration, where everyone from parents and teachers up to government workers must work together to create suitable policies that are achievable (Antony, 2022).

Personal Blog.**Do multilingual environments help with promoting inclusive leadership in the early years?****What is meant by inclusion?**

According to The Curiosity Approach (N.D) cultural inclusion and diversity should be an integral part of the daily routines in early years settings. The early years alliance (N.D) believes that when a setting is inclusive to its children and families, it provides them with regular opportunities to access early support and intervention. Inclusion in early years settings are a representation of a variety of families, disabilities, genders and races.



(Kaye, N.D)

How can early years settings promote inclusive leadership?

(The Curiosity Approach, N.D)

There are many ways leaders can encourage inclusivity within their settings. This blog will look into ways multilingual environments can help with promoting and sustaining this approach. Based on the findings of Hansel (2019), it was argued that many people assumed learning more than one language at a time may have been detrimental to the development of children. However, new research celebrates bilingualism and encourages multilingual learning environments.

Development in the early years should be child-led and fun for all children of any background. As inclusive leaders it is vital to decentralise and imagine how it would feel if every book was in a language they couldn't understand? Every poster or display on the wall was indecipherable to them? Well for children that have English as an additional Language (EAL) research suggests they feel socially isolated with no sense of connections. Maslow's (1943) theory of eventual self-actualisation will not be achieved when children feel so unhappy and unsafe (WordPress, N.D). Multilingual approaches in a classroom such as images, translators, and approachable body language are some of the ways to ensure inclusion. Teachers are also reminded that by using different languages during a lesson and moving between them can allow everyone to understand and join in on the conversation. Multilingual classrooms foster cultural identity, offers academic, cognitive and socio-economic advantages to children. While it is noted that there is a lack of resources and teacher training as well as funding, leaders are reminded that by implementing even a small number of these changes can have a positive impact of the EAL children within their settings (Smile foundation, 2023; Norris, N.D). ILT Education (2024) believe that for leaders to be truly inclusive and multilingual to their learners they should ensure their learning environments have a diverse selection of books that children can make connections with. Story telling within the setting should also be bilingual, moving between the languages. They also suggest that language learning games can also be beneficial in the early years as this learning process can be fun. It is also suggested that any labels or display boards should be done in different languages to create an immersive experience for the children and develop a sense of wonder regarding other languages. Through fostering a multilingual environment leaders can create inclusive environments where children can positively contribute to a globalized society.

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