Inclusive Leadership: working together to support children and families.

Part 1

According to Ferdman (2021) an inclusive leader is someone who values the opinions and contributions of others and fosters a space for multiple dimensions of diversity. Furthermore, an inclusive leader will adopt a respectful, relational practice, that welcomes individual contribution and encourages collaboration, ensuring everyone is committed towards shared outcomes (Bortini *et al.,* 2018). Similarly, Reza (2021) believes an inclusive leader is someone who creates a positive working/learning environment, ruling out bias, discrimination and favour based on culture, race, colour, learning disability or other protected characteristics. An inclusive leader in the early years will take an equitable approach and create an environment that is safe, where their learners feel comfortable, valued and feel a sense of belonging (Randel *et al.,* 2018; International Childhood Education, 2021). In addition, the learner's individuality and the heritage of both them and their families are understood and respected (Siraj and Hallet, 2016).

Ferdman (2021) places emphasis on the importance of effective inclusive leadership, believing this provides children with support and opportunities during the most influential years of their development and ensuring they are treated fairly. Brodie (2015) agrees stating inclusive practice within the early years is considered vital as these young children are beginning to form their own identity, therefore, the interactions they have with their teachers, parents, wider-family, and their peers can greatly impact on how they view themselves, others and their self-confidence. Furthermore, Ferdman (2021) states that it is important that an inclusive leader models an approach that enables the children in their care, other professionals, families and the community to feel valued, respected and that their contribution matters. Thus, creating a positive environment for growth and development, with the needs of the child at the forefront (Wilson, 2016).

Robbie is a four-year-old boy and comes from a broken home. His parents split recently, and it was quite acrimonious. Robbie has remained living with mum, however, he does occasionally see dad on weekends. Mum has expressed how difficult co-parenting has been as there is very little communication between both her and dad. She has also been unemployed since before Robbie was born and relied heavily on the income dad was bringing home. Dad does not come to collect Robbie from school often, however the few times he has it is noticeable that he stands alone on the yard and does not join in on conversations with the other parents. When collecting Robbie, dad does not often make eye contact with you or does not speak much, however, mum communicates with the school well. You would like to hold a meeting with other professionals and his parents as you have concerns that Robbie is regressing in his development over the last couple of months. Robbie is toilet trained, however there have been several occasions where he has wet himself in school more recently. He also comes to school in dirty clothes and looks unkempt. He also appears very tired and tends to fall asleep whilst in class. In addition, you have noticed that he does not seem his normal happy self and seems withdrawn

around the other children. He has also lost interest in certain activities that he would normally enjoy.

Within this scenario, the main priority of the inclusive leader would be helping Robbie to develop a sense of belonging according to Johansson and Puroila (2021). Souto-Manning, Ghim and Madu (2021) believe that belonging is a key concept within the early years, it can have a big impact on children's socioemotional and cognitive development. Thus, affecting children's attachments and their beliefs in their potential and capabilities (Souto-Manning, Ghim and Madu, 2021). It is likely that due to the conflict Robbie is witnessing at home, he may be feeling a mix of emotions that a four-year-old does not know how to understand, such as anxiety, sadness or busts of anger (Grimmer, 2022). In addition, there is a change in routine due to the breakdown of his parent's relationship, resulting in Robbie feeling anxious, unsettled and worried (Marschall, 2017; Grimmer, 2022).

As an inclusive leader, the main priority would be to ensure that in school Robbie is welcomed into a safe and secure learning environment (Essa and Burnham, 2019; Siraj and Hallet, 2016). Furthermore, Essa and Burnham (2019) believe that doing this will help provide Robbie with emotional stability and security. Similarly, Wentzel (2016) believes by having practitioners who model a joyful approach to learning, greet the children with a smile and ask each child how they are feeling will help to develop a positive relationship with Robbie. Building a positive relationship with Robbie and showing an interest in him is key for him to form a positive attachment to the practitioners working closely with him (Davis, Costigan and Schubert, 2017).

Bowlby's attachment theory suggests that if a child is not experiencing a consistent, stable secure attachment bond, this can lead to the development of emotional, social or cognitive problems (Fletcher and Gallichan, 2016; Holmes, 2014). It is likely that this is the case for Robbie at home due to the conflict and stress mum is experiencing. Bowlby's theory suggests that children's social and emotional development is immensely shaped by the relationships with their caregivers (Shirvanian and Michael, 2017; Fletcher and Gallichan, 2016). Therefore, it is considered vital that in school Robbie experiences consistent routine and has his needs met to support his holistic well-being (Dwoling, 2014; Howard, Burton and Levermore, 2020). Furthermore, McDermott (2016) suggests that allowing Robbie to bring something comforting and familiar to school, such as his favourite toy could help him feel more comfortable and at ease. Similarly, Grimmer (2022) and Caswell (2021) believe that 'comfort objects' for children can resemble a sense of safety and security when they are feeling anxious.

Research conducted by Arthur *et al.* (2018) suggests that there may be barriers hindering Robbie from developing a sense of belonging in the classroom such as, Robbie not engaging in play with the other children. Feeling included and part of a group is essential to feeling as though you belong, therefore being excluded or rejected whether it is intentional or not can lead to Robbie feeling anxious and lonely (Souto-Manning, Ghim and Madu, 2021). Moss (2019) believes that some children cannot consider the positionality of other children like Robbie for example, as they or their family have never experienced poverty or conflict. Therefore, this can result in

some children being mean to Robbie as his school uniform is often dirty, leading to Robbie feeling a lack of self-worth (Maholmes, 2014; Musgrave, 2017). The role of the inclusive leader would be to teach the young children the importance of showing empathy and kindness to their peers including Robbie and educate them on diversity and inclusion (Theoharis and Scanlan, 2021). However, Wightwick (2023) states that due to a lack of funding and heavy teacher workloads, this results in less appropriate training for early years staff regarding educating their pupils on the importance of equality and inclusion. Although, Iluz, Adi-Japha and Klein (2016) suggest an inclusive leader could encourage practitioners to engage in activities with smaller groups of children at one time, ensuring Robbie is included and supported throughout, encouraging his participation.

According to Hadfield (2015) an inclusive leader could offer support to Robbie's family to help resolve the issues previously mentioned. Mum expressed how difficult co-parenting has been due to little communication between her and dad. In addition, there has been a change in financial circumstances since the split as mum is unemployed, which is evidently affecting the well-being of her and Robbie (Nikolova and Nikolaev, 2021). As an inclusive leader guidance will be provided to mum on how to apply for free school meals. Furthermore, Department for Education (2023) and Welsh Government (2023a) state that since mum is in receipt of child tax credit and has an annual income of less than £16,190, Robbie will be entitled to free school meals under section 512 of the (*Education Act 1996*) which states that all maintained schools have a duty to provide free school meals to those who qualify.

At present, Robbie does not attend breakfast club in school. Breakfast club is a government scheme that provides a free healthy and nutritious breakfast for school children within a local authority-maintained school (Welsh Government, 2015a). Therefore, information regarding this will be provided to Robbie's parents to encourage Robbie's attendance, ensuring that he is receiving a nutritious breakfast each school day (NHS, 2020). Similarly, Farthing (no date) believes that Robbie receiving free school meals and breakfast could help relieve some of the financial pressure that mum is currently experiencing, potentially leading to increased well-being of both Robbie and mum.

However, research conducted by James (2012) and Jenkins (2021) found that 33% of young children and 40% of parents felt embarrassment and stigma as a key driver for not accepting free school meals. Furthermore, Francis-Devine, Malik and Danechi (2023) state that nutritious school meals are imperative to young children's development and well-being, yet there is stigma around those that qualify to receive them for free. In addition, James (2012) stated that 11% of eligible parents reported they received insufficient information regarding the free school meals programme, therefore they were not receiving them. According to Joynson (2023) an inclusive leader should ensure all parents are provided with correct information regarding relevant government schemes that are available to benefit the well-being of the children within the setting.

Robbie has been arriving to school in dirty uniform due to mum not being able to afford to wash them often. As an inclusive leader, it is their role to provide information

to mum on the school uniform recycle bank that is run by a collaboration of school staff and the parent teacher association (PTA) (Welsh Government, 2023b). Furthermore, Welsh Government (2023b) believes that by providing second-hand uniforms to parents can benefit them, particularly those on low incomes. In addition, Joung and Park-Poaps (2013) believe this is also a great opportunity for the school to encourage sustainability and promote its wider environmental benefits.

According to Burleson and Thoron (2014) and Hopper (2020) ensuing Robbie is provided with clean uniform to wear to school each day and is having a healthy and nutritious breakfast and lunch in school are meeting his very basic physiological needs. This links well with Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, which states that for young children to develop and progress, and to reach self-actualization, first they must have their very basic needs met (Hopper, 2020).

According to Gilchrist and Zhang (2022) there are unconscious gender stereotypes of staff within schools in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Mistry and Sood (2022) agree and state it is generally working-class white women seen within early years settings today. This is the case in Robbie's class in school. According to Lyndon (2019) some working-class practitioners may not be able to consider the positionality of Robbie and mum in relation to them struggling financially, as they lack understanding around the topic of poverty and how to support effectively. Garnett (2018) and Steinberg and Krumer-Nevo (2020) state that practitioners may not be able to empathise with Robbie or mum, due to never having experienced poverty or the affects it has themselves. In practice, Roberts (2017) believes this may look like a practitioner making assumptions about young children and their families based upon the child's appearance or attitude, assuming that the parents must be lazy or simply do not care. Robbie often comes to school in an unwashed uniform or does not have any money for fruit at snack time. This is due to mum struggling financially, not through lack of care or love for Robbie (Magnuson and Duncan, 2019).

Briggs (2020) believes that if the practitioners lack understanding of Robbie's situation and how that has affected him, they may choose the wrong strategies to help him. This could look like them wanting to put Robbie back in nappies since he has been wetting himself in school more regularly or not being patient when he does not want to engage in play with his peers (Biggs, 2020). There are underlying issues previously mentioned that must be resolved first, for Robbie to feel safe and secure in school (Hopper, 2020). Furthermore, Morton and Guerin (2018) and Black-Hawkins (2017) consider it important that an inclusive leader ensures the practitioners in Robbie's class are fully aware of Robbie's home situation and the challenges mum is experiencing and understand the affect's this is having on Robbie, resulting in him feeling anxious and withdrawn. Therefore, being inclusive of Robbie and how best to support him (Black-Hawkins, 2017).

According to Ingleby (2017) there are barriers to inclusive practice. Some practitioners in Robbie's class may lack experience or understanding regarding how to best support Robbie. Research conducted by National Education Union (2023) states that one in three children in the UK will be affected by poverty, therefore, Ucan (2016) and Lightfoot and Frost (2018) consider it important that early year's

practitioners are encouraged to participate in appropriate training to gain a deeper understanding and support the child. Similarly, The Royal Society of Medicine (2022) and Shelemy, Harvey and Waite (2019) believe that practitioners are not adequately trained to recognise and respond to children's mental health problems. Therefore, children like Robbie would not be supported effectively without appropriate practitioner training (Srinivasacharlu, 2019; Ucan, 2016).

However, Wightwick (2023) and Sanchez, Haro-Rodriguez and Martinez (2019) state that there are barriers to practitioner training, such as lack of time, heavy teacher workload, and the biggest one being lack of government funding to provide such training. In addition, Frondozo *et al.* (2020) and Heggart (2015) state practitioners who foster a fixed mindset may lack willingness to change, finding additional training difficult. Therefore, Frondozo *et al.* (2020) and Dweck (2017) suggest an inclusive leader could encourage staff to foster a growth mindset when it comes to additional training and provide opportunities within work time for this to take place, promoting practitioner engagement. Therefore, ensuring staff are appropriately trained to recognise the way Robbie is feeling and how best to support his needs (Ingleby, 2017).

According to Welsh Government (2016) and Welsh Government (2015b) an inclusive leader promoting community partnership working can help support the school's family engagement and enrich the school life of their pupils. As previously mentioned, dad does not communicate well with mum or the school, therefore, to help build a positive relationship with him and to help strengthen the communication between both parents, there are ways in which an inclusive leader can help (Theoharis and Scanlan, 2021; Ferdman, 2021). According to Wang, Lai and Wang (2016) an inclusive leader could organise a family fun day, or drop-in sessions on a more regular basis, where parents, carers, children and teaching staff could come together to connect with each other. Balenzano (2020) believes this would provide opportunities for other parents to meet and share their experiences and provide support to one another. Furthermore, children would be given the opportunity to engage in play with other children and build positive relationships within their community (Fleer, 2021; Essa and Burnham, 2019). Similarly, Estyn (2020) believe this will help support the learning and well-being of Robbie and his parents.

A two-year research project conducted in collaboration between the University of Canterbury College of Education and the Central Baptist Kindergarten in Whanganui placed an early childhood centre within their local community (Duncan, 2013). Duncan (2013) states the focus was on how active adult participation in early childhood education enhances children's education, and family and community well-being. Furthermore, Ministry of Social Development (no date) believes that embedding this centre within the community encourages the development of new connections and relationships that support community wellness and children's learning outcomes. Within the centres they provide a safe and trusting environment where children and their families are welcomed in to share and listen, with children's well-being at the centre of everything (Duncan, 2013).

An inclusive leader could take inspiration from this; however, Ofsted (2023) suggests there may be barriers to applying this international approach in the UK. Ofsted (2023) and Early Years Workforce Commission (2021) state that government and school budgets may not allow for this extra service to be provided. Furthermore, Ofsted (2023) suggests that lack of staff experience or knowledge may affect the participation of some practitioners, resulting in more specific training being required for the staff. However, an inclusive leader could introduce an open-door policy within Robbie's school, providing both mum and dad with a safe and welcome space to share and build a positive relationship with the setting to benefit Robbie's holistic well-being (Gibson and Blandford, 2005; Ferdman, 2021).

In conclusion, it is evident throughout this paper that there are many opportunities for inclusive leadership (Ferdman, 2021). The strategies implemented by the inclusive leader have Robbie's well-being at the centre, ensuring he feels valued and a sense of belonging (Siraj and Hallet, 2016). Going forward, the next steps for the inclusive leader following the meeting with Robbie's parents, and teachers to discuss your concerns, would be to ensure the practitioners in Robbie's class are continuing to provide Robbie with a safe and secure environment to learn and grow in (Hopper, 2020). Furthermore, working in partnership with Robbie's parents to ensure they feel included and listened too to strengthen the relationship between them and the school (Welsh Government, 2016).

Part 2

According to Baldock, Fitzgerald and Kay (2013) policy can generally be defined as a stated intention by the government. Similarly, Bailey and Lloyd (2017) state that policy is an action taken on an issue by those with responsibility, such as government, which is considered a system of laws. Furthermore, British Ecological Society (2017) suggests it refers to the guidelines set out by the governing body to address different issues, which helps to form laws, regulations, and actions to achieve certain goals.

Ferdman (2021) took influence from Bronfenbrenner's ecological system to form systems of inclusion: a multi-level analytic framework, that suggests there are macro and micro levels of policies. Macro level policy-makers describe large organizations such as the government, who are responsible for creating policies and guidelines at a national level (Roberts, 2019). Whereas micro level policy-makers describe leaders on a smaller scale such as, district officials and school administrators (Roberts, 2019). Gunnulfsen (2018) states they simplify the policies created by the macro's, turning those policy frameworks into programmes. Ferdman (2021) believes that both macro and micro policymakers play crucial roles in shaping the education system.

According to Baldock, Fitzgerald and Kay (2013) policies are considered important in education as they determine guidelines, standards and expectations for schools and nurseries. Similarly, Department for International Development (2018) suggest that by having clear policies helps to promote consistency, fairness and equal opportunities for every pupil. Furthermore, Stevenson (no date) states that policies help protect people's rights, address the changes in society and promote the well-

being of communities and individuals. Within this paper the policy that will be explored to determine whether it enable's inclusive leadership is A Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (for the remainder of this paper, this will be referred to as Policy A) (Welsh Government, 2022).

According to Welsh Government (2022) Policy A has been developed for funded non-maintained nursery setting to adopt, if they wished to do so. It is intended primarily for the use by management committees, practitioners and leaders of funded non-maintained nursery settings, who have funding to deliver early education in Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). Furthermore, Welsh Government (2022) states that Policy A has been developed for children at the very beginning of the three to sixteen learning continuum.

Policy A uses the wording 'should' consistently throughout the document. With statements such as "The experiences we offer in the early years should be hands-on" (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 10). According to Doucet and Pont (2021) the word 'should' is considered misleading and could potentially lead to inconsistency within different settings. Similarly, Fitzgerald and Kay (2016) and Doucet and Pont (2021) suggest if a policy states 'should', some settings will understand this as something they must do, however, other settings may understand this guidance as open for interpretation, therefore they do not have to do it, it is just recommended. Policy A states that practitioners 'should' carefully observe the children's interests, then plan for future experiences, however, Rodd (2020) suggests that some practitioners may feel confused with this guidance as to whether they 'should' or 'must' do it. Anderson and Holloway (2020) suggest the implications of this may be that each practitioner will deliver in different ways, therefore effecting the quality of children's learning, preventing it from being inclusive. Similarly, Doucet and Pont (2021) suggest that the issue of the word 'should' in policy documents prevents progress in children's education due to a lack of understanding of how policy can be defined and implemented. Furthermore, Bortini *et al.* (2018) suggests this could pose as a barrier to inclusive leadership as children in different settings will be receiving in-equal opportunities within their education.

Within Policy A, the word 'quality' referring to high-quality experiences or quality of provision is used throughout. According to Moss (2014) the word 'quality' is open for interpretation, how do practitioners know what 'quality' means, and therefore if they all have the same understanding of it. Burchinal (2017) and Eggert, Fukkink and Eckhardt (2018) believe quality within a nursery refers to care and education being provided to a high standard. Furthermore, Essa and Burnham (2019) believe high quality involves the creation of a stimulating and nurturing environment, that encourages children's learning and development. Similarly, Cook and Rouse (2014) believe that quality refers to the nursery having dedicated and well-trained practitioners, who focus on children's holistic growth.

A longitudinal study conducted by Sylva *et al.* (2004) which is referred to as the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project, explored the effects of pre-school education on children's development between the ages of three-seven. The findings of the project according to Sylva *et al.* (2004) suggested that all types of

early years settings can be classed as good quality, however, in nursery schools and settings integrating care and education, the quality was deemed higher overall, with the children attending being associated with better behavioural and intellectual development. However, Burchinal (2017) argues that practitioners within different nurseries will have their own perception of what good 'quality' provision looks like. Furthermore, Doucet and Pont (2021) state that due to a lack of information regarding the definition of 'quality', this does not enable inclusive leadership as there will be inconsistencies with the level of care and education each child will receive.

According to Welsh Government (2022) Policy A was developed through co-construction by practitioners, for practitioners. Ferdman (2021) suggests this enables inclusive leadership as there is evidence of effective collaboration to develop a national curriculum used throughout Wales. Power, Newton and Taylor (2020) suggest that by having a curriculum designed by a collaboration of educated individuals, with first-hand experience of early childhood education, they can deliver a curriculum that aspires to provide solid foundations to support children's holistic development. Furthermore, Policy A promotes children's rights and the inclusion of the voice of the child, however, Welsh Government (2022) states that children's opinions were not included in the co-construction of Policy A. In addition, UNICEF (no date) and Lewallen *et al.* (2015) suggest that involving children in policy-making helps to gain deeper insights into their perspectives and needs, allowing for a more inclusive and effective policy that truly reflects the interests of the children. Similarly, Covell, Howe and McGillivray (2016) believe this would create a policy that recognises children's rights and empowers them to develop a sense of ownership, agency and autonomy by expressing their opinions and ideas.

Part 3

How to ensure children from different cultures feel a sense of belonging within an early years classroom in Wales.

According to Devarakonda (2021) within early years classrooms in Wales, it is easy for practitioners to be discriminative towards children of different cultures without realising. This could look like a child from India being in a year one class that only communicates through the medium of English or Welsh, with storybooks only in those languages and only basing the topic of activities around events that happen in the UK (McAnelly and Gaffney, 2019). Furthermore, Robinson and Diaz (2016) believe this child is likely to feel left out or that their identity is not fully acknowledged. According to Banks (2016) to promote inclusive leadership, firstly, an environment where all children feel respected and valued for who they are needs to be created.

Haug (2016) believes a way in which inclusive leadership could be promoted is by celebrating the diversity of the children within the class. According to Theoharis and Scanlan (2021) this can be achieved by incorporating activities, books and discussions that highlight different cultures and traditions, such as Diwali, which is a celebration that is considered important in the culture of the young boy in year one and his family. Similarly, Siraj and Hallet (2016) suggests that if a child with different cultural beliefs saw a book with people in it that looked like them, and in their native

language, this could help them develop a sense of belonging in a class where they may often feel different.