



Diversity and Inclusion. (Source: Bourke and Titus, 2020).

Inclusive Leadership: working together to support families

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Section 1.

1.1. Inclusive leadership.

In recent years, the term 'leadership' has suffered a shift in meaning within the workplace systems, surpassing the image of a one man leader or a group of men controlling and deciding the direction of action, towards a democratic leadership where individuals within the system are contributing and collaborating to reach common goals and outcomes; in other words, leadership is not an individual's duty anymore, but rather 'it is the shared responsibility of everyone in the system' (Booyesen, 2021). Similarly, Rodd (2013) states that the early years leader acts 'with others' instead of just asserting power over them. The conversion of the term's meaning does not negate the existence of an individual person as a leader, but rather it shows a 'post-heroic' form of leadership, where the role of a leader is to enable collaborative work, being open to antagonistic discussions, exuding trust, open-mindedness, having good people skills and good conflict management abilities (Hafford-Letchfield, 2014). Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) assume the same position, expounding on how leadership in the early years educational sector is generally viewed as positive, leaders and leadership often assuming a different terminology such as teacher, pedagogue or educator; regardless of the nomenclature, leadership is seen as relational and interconnected, where individuals and groups of people who possess personal qualities are able to motivate and inspire others in order to achieve a common goal.

Inclusive leadership in education is the on-going practice of fighting against any kind of discrimination and marginalisation, so that all individuals are taking part in the social and communal aspect of the educational process; as inclusive leadership advocates for equity and social justice, it also empowers the marginalised to shape the systemic processes so that everyone can benefit and have access to them equally (Ryan, 2006). It is important to note the inter-dependance between inclusive leadership and the state and sense of belonging, which is a critical part of children's holistic development and well-being, also being catalogued as a basic need for each individual (Caritas Europa, 2016). Johansson and Puroila (2021) highlight that educators need to address and commit to children's belonging, making them feel welcome, accepted, safe and valued, thus creating a community devoid of

exclusion and marginalisation and where individual identities are celebrated within the group. One relevant example is how teacher's attitudes and knowledge base towards the inclusion of children with ALN in regular classrooms is closely linked with predicting how likely they are going to create a supportive and inclusive environment and how often they are going to use effective strategies for such children (Ewing, Monsen and Kielblock, 2017). Making use of existing strategies to change and adapt the physical and pedagogical environment so that it promotes learning and good conduct in the classroom for all children is in line with inclusive pedagogy (DuPaul and Stoner, 2014; Maciver et al., 2019; Florian, 2015).

1.2. Study case

A recent example of inclusive leadership practices in setting was welcoming Ivana, a five years old girl from Ukraine, whose family took refuge in the UK after the war started. In line with inclusive pedagogy principles, the decision-making process regarding Ivana's academic support took into consideration not only her teacher's knowledge and skills but also their beliefs and views regarding Ivana's cultural background, her life experiences and how these might affect their teaching methods and her learning development (Florian, 2015). For that matter, the staff agreed to regularly use effective inclusive strategies which relate to Augmentative and Alternative Communication tools, such as Makaton, or making learning visual through facial expressions, gestures, photos and pictures, or using visual timetables.

Studies have found that introducing Makaton into classrooms with English as additional language (EAL) pupils, improved their communication skills by giving them confidence to initiate dialogue through the use of symbols at first, then progressing to using speech and symbols together (Mistry and Barnes, 2012; Sin, 2020). After a period of time using Makaton, Ivana's anxiety was visibly diminished and she was more engaged in conversation, having the confidence to repeat some of the English words along with the symbol. This development is consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) which states that humans need to overcome emotional and social impediments for effective learning. However, the teachers's experience of Makaton was limited, with only two teachers being confident enough to use it regularly in order to support Ivana's language aquisition. This type of barrier has been identified by Sin (2020) who found out that teachers practiced Makaton

inconsistently, not using all its elements, thus hindering its effectiveness in helping EAL students. Other barriers for using AAC identified by teachers in Ivana's setting, were related to insufficient resources or staffing, lack of continuous access to training, and that fact that the strategies were time-consuming in an already busy environment (Norburn *et al.*, 2016). Mistry and Barnes (2012) highlight the importance of providing educators with Makaton training opportunities for better knowledge and understanding, in order for EAL pupils to seize all its benefits.

As Ivana did not speak English at all when she started school, the staff started observing Ivana's non-verbal communication closely, in order to assess her apprehension of what it was communicated to her and to take notes of her interests and needs in order to scaffold her development (O'Sullivan, 2015). This strategy is in line with Article 12 of the UNCRC which states children have the right to form their own views and opinions and be free to express them (UNICEF, 1990). The language obstacle was difficult to overcome at first, as Ivana's internalisation translated into her actions and she seldomly used actual words in her own language to speak her mind. Because of the fact that children who speak or are used to a different language at home are not classed as having a learning difficulty, giving Ivana the right support while trying to not single her out from the pupils, was difficult at times (Welsh Government, 2021). This challenge was extended to her family, as they did not speak English and an Ukrainian interpreter was unavailable in the area, making it difficult for her teachers to ask them about Ivana's likes and dislikes, about her cultural background and about her family structure and customs. This barrier hindered the correct functioning of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, where all groups around the child have to interact with one another for optimal growth (Swick and Williams, 2006). In a classroom environment, this theory translates into teachers seeking to connect and establish meaningful relationships with the child and the child's family in order to assess the strength of the relationships constructed by the child and identify any possible disconnections. This process enhances a child's wellbeing and their inclination towards learning (Steed, 2019). Welsh Government (2022) highlights that establishing relationships with new children and their families should be an enjoyable experience for everyone involved.

However, considering Ivana's case, being an inclusive leader - a role model with good communication skills and with the ability to effectively collaborate with her parents, was an obstacle in itself. The language barrier coupled with other factors -

such as being refugees in a different country with different societal customs, an insecure financial status and possible trauma from having to leave their home and country in such a manner, made Ivana's parents reluctant to engage with the teachers and seemingly unapproachable, even at drop-off or pick-up times. The teachers conveyed important messages to Ivana and her parents, using Google translate. There has been positive feedback from teachers using this translation tool for EAL learners, the main benefit being that it gave children the chance to understand what was going to happen and also a voice to be heard, allowing them to participate more in classroom activities (Martin and McCracken, 2018). However, teachers thought learning to effectively use Google translate was a time and patience-consuming process, and also the translation was not always accurate. Moreover, Ivana's teachers reflected on how it did not function properly in a loud environment, which was at times frustrating for Ivana.

With the help of the school's EAL coordinator, Ivana's teachers were able to access a variety of resources aimed at helping children arriving from Ukraine, recommended by the UK government, such as Ukrainian Buddy Box or online applications for learning and translating in English (Department for Education, 2022). Moreover, efforts have been made to acquire dual language English -Ukrainian books from Badger Learning to support Ivana's language learning (Badger Learning, 2022). The downside was that the resources were only available in PDF, which meant Ivana had to have access to a smart electronic device at home too, which was not an option for her parents, as their financials did not allow for such a purchase and also, they were not suitable for Ivana, as the books were appropriate for readers from eight to fifteen years of age. For that matter, a Welcome Reading Pack from the National Literacy Trust was ordered in school, portraying stories of refugees and migrants, in hope of addressing Ivana's possible trauma, help her understand the dire events in her life and eventually heal from any possible shock she might have experienced (National Literacy Trust, 2022a). Moreover, the teachers have compiled a support pack for Ivana's family, which included a 'Time Together' booklet in Ukrainian on how parents can assist their child's learning at home, and access to Polylingo, a multilingual digital book service (National Literacy Trust, 2022b; ILT Education, 2022). Of course, the home learning environment is not controlled, therefore teachers were unable to quantify the support given at home because the outcomes are not immediately visible.

Ivana's teachers tried accessing services to help with her anxiety and withdrawal in classroom by securing a sand play therapist for routine sessions. Parker *et al.* (2021) emphasise the critical role of trauma in children's internalised behaviour, and how this often translates in rumination and anxiety. Unfortunately, the funds were insufficient for this collaboration. Hallet (2016) talks about how children's feelings of belonging and being valued in a community shapes their attitude towards learning and towards the differences and similarities between them and others, or between their own experiences and other people's experiences. But for that to happen, children need to feel comfortable enough and feel like they are listened to. Ivana's teachers tried dealing with the remnants of her experiences by encouraging and engaging her in play. Play therapy is available for all educators as long as there is a deep understanding of what the process entails, and knowledge on how to provide children with the age-appropriate, symbolic toys which can be used as a form of expressing thoughts and emotions, thus providing a therapeutic outlet (Parker *et al.*, 2021). With consistency and appropriate support Ivana started showing signs of wanting to integrate with her peers, which meant she was becoming comfortable to express her needs, be a part of her classroom collective and showing promising signs of recovering from the critical experiences she has lived through at such a young age.

Another critical aspect of Ivana's life that was considered when planning for inclusive education, was the intersectionality of her experiences - her family socioeconomic status was low, she and her family did not speak English, she fled her home and her home country because of war and she was a female, thus at risk facing gender-related stereotyping and cultural obstacles (Theoharis and Scanlan, 2021). Caritas Europe (2016) identify several barriers migrants and refugees experience, such as cultural challenges - different language, religion and community, structural obstacles such as lack of legal documentation for opening a bank account or accessing healthcare and socio-economic obstacles relating to financials, employment and participation in social life. In fact, only two of these aspects of Ivana's life could be approached by her teachers: her language acquisition and the fact that she might experience gender discrimination at some point in her education. It has been shown that educators in UK nurseries and schools are unintentionally educating children based on gender, often times involving boys and girls in different activities, using gender-related vocabulary while referring to them and even

rewarding behaviour which is perceived as gender fitting (Culhane and Bazley, 2019). Moreover, toys, play activities, the selection of books available in a classroom can also propagate gender stereotypes. Toys designed with a gender in mind might reflect a message of how the children need to behave and look, but they can also carry the message that the other gender-group is unskilled, thus hindering their chances at developing new abilities (King *et al.*, 2021). Culhane and Bazley (2019) point out how colouring books in the US portray male characters as more dynamic and more active, thus reiterating gender stereotypes.

Ferdman and Roberts (2014) emphasise how inclusive behaviour starts with accepting one's true self, only then being able to accept other people's diverse identities, characteristics, experiences and values. This attitude benefits the collective as different perspectives and views shaped by the diverse life experiences can only enhance the contributions brought to a group, thus maximising its potential (Ferdman and Roberts, 2014). For instance, considering the language barrier, schools leaders who adhere to inclusive ethos - being the ones who interpret and implement policy, they have to analyse whether language diversity is viewed as a problem or as a resource and a right; those who work towards a just and equitable education for children view EAL pupils' language and culture as a resource and a right, rather than a problem which needs to be rectified (Theoharis and Scanlan, 2021). In Ivana's case, acquiring knowledge and understanding about her culture and home-language was a slow process, mainly because of the obstacles mentioned above - reluctance of the child and parents to speak to teachers, the language barrier or behavioural challenges.

Improving the holistic wellbeing of children and young people has been at the heart of the Children Act 2004, dictating that local authorities, children's services, agencies and the early years sector should work together towards this outcome (Hadfield, Jopling and Needham, 2015). Solomon (2019) points out how multi-agency working needs to be approached as an integrated part of the school provision, and not just as an addition. The author also highlights how a school leader whose multi-agency working strategy is focused solely on meeting the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) requirements and on the general academic progress, might hinder collaboration and dialogues between agencies, thus interfering with achieving the best possible outcomes for the young ones. The school

leaders and staff made it a priority to make Ivana feel welcome and to engage other agencies in order for her to integrate and progress in her development.

Section 2. The new Curriculum for Wales - an inclusive policy?

Inclusive leaders create changes by having the courage to act towards their vision, designing a plan of action and finding the required resources (Bortini *et al.*, 2016). But they also have to adjust the complex requirements of inclusive education policies to the structure of their school, to determine the course of action towards a successful inclusive education (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2020). UNESCO (no date) refers to education policies as being legally binding documents which define the educational outcomes expected from the system, its priorities and the strategies to be used as course of action towards achieving the common goal. In Wales, education policies are directed by the Welsh Government, separate from the UK government, which is responsible for the education in England (Lewis *et al.*, 2017). Baldcock, Fitzgerald and Kay (2013) point out that governmental policies are not rigidly created by politicians, but are also determined by the public or media views and by a variety of organisations within the state. The authors state that policies should have specific characteristics such as clearly outlined values and facts, clear objectives, calculated costs for implementation, the implications for daily practice and others. Regarding inclusive policies and consequent practices, this is a system constructed on multiple levels, starting at a micro-level - how the individual experiences inclusion and ending at a macro-level - which includes societal values, practices and policies related to inclusion (Ferdman, 2021). Educational leadership policy-making is viewed to be the work of government individuals or of academic individuals who dictate best practice (Atkinson and Biegun, 2017). But the construction of the new curriculum's policies was done in collaboration with educators, which reflects inclusivity and also challenged the traditional 'top-down' approach to policymaking (OECD, 2017, p. 8).

However, the successful implementation of inclusive education policies, especially in the low-income countries around the world, is still hindered by a variety of factors such as lacking policies and legal support, having inadequate or insufficient equipment, facilities and resources, insufficiently trained specialists or lack of up-to-date training opportunities, an inflexible curriculum, outdated pedagogical methods, defective and unsupportive school leadership and socio-cultural stereotypes related to those who need to be included (Schuelka, 2018). The new curriculum for Wales highlights the importance of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act 2018, which will strengthen the curriculum's

implementation of inclusive practices, seeking well-being and equity for all children (Welsh Government, 2020a).

For example, The Welsh Curriculum for funded, non-maintained nursery settings emphasises the critical role of belonging for children's well-being, reiterating terms such as 'secure relationships', 'connection', 'community', 'a firm sense of belonging', which reflect the inclusive ethos of the policy (Welsh Government, 2020b, p. 28). Moreover, the inclusion section of the document talks about how visual materials and resources in which children can identify themselves according to their gender, race, ability, religion and so on, have to be included in the creation of the classroom environment. It is highlighted here that educators need to connect with parents and families, so that they are comfortable to share specific information about their child. However, the inclusion section of the document introduces a general discussion about it, afterwards focusing on inclusion of children with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Surely the discussion could have been extended to talk about the inclusion of EAL pupils, or children of different race, not merely mentioning that children need to find representation in the classroom resources, as mentioned above.

Regarding the Curriculum for Wales, there are some critiques worth mentioning. Lewis *et al.* (2017) believe that Wales education system still suffers from discrimination issues, as pointed out by the low academic achievement of children in social care, or by the subaverage scores in core subjects of children of black ethnicity. The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021, which contains the legal structure of the curriculum, proclaims that the inclusive principles of the document apply to all learners, but the legislation goes on to say that the curriculum's provision does not apply or has to be modified for learners with additional learning needs; another aspect which is confusing is the curriculum's guidance: on the one hand it promotes and values a multilingual society and cultural diversity, in line with inclusive principles such as belonging, social harmony and equality, but one cannot ignore the language used to proclaim the progression steps: 'I can talk', 'I can interact', 'I can create' and so on, which might marginalise the children who are unable to express themselves empathetically; additionally, even though there is no evident language portraying a deficit model towards students with ALN in the curriculum documentation, the fact that there are no affirmations of the benefits of teaching all pupils together, sends an ambiguous message (Knight and

Crick, 2021). It is argued that in order for a setting to be truly inclusive, it should be accessible for all pupils, well organised to include diverse resources that ensure genuine representation for all children and are not designed for certain categories of children (for instance, gender-specific toys) and the environment should be altered so that it allows all pupils' participation (Welsh Government, 2021). Although the curriculum for Wales' legislation is overall seeking to be inclusive, critics have found some inconsistencies between documents and practice, as mentioned above.

But the implementation of the policies in education might not be as straightforward as one might think. Firstly, because there is a lack of consensus on what this process means in education and secondly there are key elements which either act as barriers or as facilitators towards the implementation process (Viennet and Pont, 2017). The traditional viewpoint of micro-policies and in-school practices might not align with the inclusive ethos of the new macro-policies; another barrier could be the leaders who might think the issues around diversity and inclusion are not important enough to take action usually because they have insufficient knowledge and training and they do not understand the complexity of it, or they might not be held responsible for their inclusive practices; and lastly, possibly the most problematic obstacle in implementing inclusive practices is bias, be it bias for or against certain individuals or groups of people, the fact that all people are biased in their opinions and their consequent actions might create an environment of inequality (Gerritsen, 2020, p. 17).

Section 3. How to promote inclusive leadership in an early years setting.

Atkinson and Biegun (2017) reflect on how a pedagogical leader resists hierarchy and accepts the uncertainty and the discomfort which comes with having open dialogue and dissensus regarding educational practice, because such conversations are sparking new ideas and deepen the relationships between educators, children and their families. Florian (2015) points out how the inclusive pedagogy must reflect on how to support the individual child concomitant with being dedicated to all learners, thus abstaining from differentiating certain pupils. In light of that, there are numerous strategies which focus on how to create an integrative environment where all children feel like they belong and where learning happens implicitly. For Ivana, a five year old Ukrainian refugee girl who exhibited an internalised behaviour and anxiousness in the classroom, the educators came up with the idea of creating a family garden on the school grounds, where the families and their children would enjoy doing gardening and spending time with their own children and other families. This strategy would help build positive relationships with parents or carers, which is a crucial part of creating inclusive educational environment (Anna Freud Centre, no date). It would also be an opportunity for Ivana's parents to engage with the community at a non-verbal level, thus setting the foundation for their own learning.

Another strategy used to support Ivana was to provide more visual materials in the classroom, such as timetables, labelling of toys, activities, or wall boards showing pictures of the staff and where to locate them. These adaptations to the physical environment are inclusive in nature, as they help all children enhance their communication, reduce anxiety and frustration and foster better interactions amongst pupils, all the while avoiding singularizing certain pupils who might need more support for such tasks (Rutherford *et al.*, 2020). Teachers decluttered the classroom, as Ivana (and other children) was possibly over-stimulated by the multitude of colours and materials, resources and toys, and they also introduced a teepee tent in a corner of the classroom, that represented a silent spot where Ivana and other children could retreat to when they felt overwhelmed.

To conclude, advocating for diversity, for an inclusive educational environment and welcoming professional development is what makes an inclusive

leader. Teaching people empathy to acknowledge the problems around diversity in education and to change their views towards inclusion might be a near impossible quest, but what the inclusive leader can do is inspire and motivate others around so that through open communication and collaboration, the value of inclusion and diversity is embraced by all, thus positively altering the life of the community, of the families in it and most importantly, the life of the children. Embedding these values into macro and micro-policies, into the logistics of implementing them in daily practice and into training opportunities could be the catalysts for breaking through traditional patterns and pave the way to authentic inclusion.

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