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Inclusive leadership: Working together to support families

Part 1

What is inclusive leadership?

Leadership and power are inseparable and at the core to our understanding of the concept of leadership, inclusive leaders have the power to encourage and enable stakeholders to redistribute this power through active involvement (Brooker, 2024 and Ho, 2012). Asymmetrical power relations can be a major barrier by giving the perception to families that their voices will not be heard, disengaging them (Norheim and Moser, 2020). This matters because research shows that parental engagement has more impact on a child's academic progress than socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity.

Inclusive leaders play a vital role in improving communication with stakeholders and listening to the views of children, families, colleagues and other professionals, it is imperative that they provide a psychological safety net where opinions can be freely express without judgment or reprisal so that a shared vision is formed can be worked towards (Lewis, 2024 and CEI, 2022). A potential barrier is technical language used by professionals and methods of communication, communication needs to be clear and accessible when using a stakeholder model in inclusive leadership (Woods, Morrison, Palincsar, 2018). Ultimately a leader is dedicated to promotion of equity and removal of barriers for all (CEI, 2021).

This requires a growth mindset, to recognize and engage with the many nuances and complexities of diversity to develop practices that support inclusion (Ferdman et al, 2021). Randel et al (2018) posits that inclusive leadership is defined by positive behaviours that facilitate a culture of belongingness whilst appreciating the uniqueness of the individual. Furthermore, Lewis (2024) states that inclusive leaders forge equitable relationships that empower reflexivity and growth. Ferdman et al (2021) elaborates on this statement by stating that inclusive leaders can bring people together to influence power that acknowledges the benefits of diversity and inclusion.

Brunswick's Lenes (1952) often adopted by leaders to understand unconscious bias and to evaluate equitable practices when mitigating discrimination (Paddifoot, 2024. Broder and Undorf, 2019). Duckworths (2022) Wheel of power supports understanding of intersectionality and enables leaders to see that people can encounter advantage and disadvantage, based on their identity and social capital (DPAG, 2023). DPAG, 2023 explain that having white privilege does not mean that you have not suffered hardship, but it does mean that the colour of your skin was not contributing factor. Thus, supporting leaders to be mindful of challenges of unconscious bias regarding social differences and cultural appropriation is necessary for settings when being culturally responsive and supporting diversity and social justice (Khalifa, 2018).

Lewis (2024) posits inclusive leaders create environments where everyone matters, where allyship and not privilege resides, where children and staff from all backgrounds and knowledge are respected, feel seen and heard and have a sense of belonging and psychological safety. Inclusive leaders are aware of their own biases and work on unlearning them and pursue collaboration to inform inclusive practice.

Case study

The Dalca family have three children that attend school, Tudor 7 years old in year 1 with a diagnosis of autism, Eduard 5 years old in reception and Irina 3 years old, in nursery.

Dad has recently become a widower and is struggling to manage daily family life as he is the now a lone parent and has voiced concerns about his mental health decline since the loss of his wife. Mr Dalca is currently on long term leave from his job. Mr Dalca is Romanian and both Tudor and Eduard were born in Romania with the family moving to the UK when Irina was a baby approximately 2 and a half years ago.

Children

The children in the scenario will be exposed to many complex and overlapping ACE's, including poverty and bereavement. I shall be focusing on authentic communication and barriers to hearing a child's voice.

Cultural capital are the experiences, behaviours and skills a child uses as reference for success in education and socially and is part of their unique identity (Early Education, 2021) and include a child's home language and culture. One of the most important tools an inclusive leader can harness is a child's voice (Murry, 2019) this requires transparent and open communication with parents and other professionals including multi-agencies about a child's development, any additional needs and an understanding of the many variant's children use to communicate, when establishing a holistic picture of a child. Tudor aged 7 has autism and may need his environment adapted and access to a variety of resources including visual/pictorial cues such as a emotional barometer or choice board and staff trained in Makaton to support Tudor express himself and his wellbeing NAS(No Date) . However inclusive setting aspires to be some parents of

children with SEND differences sometimes struggle when forging relationships with professions because they themselves are in a grieving process of understanding that their child will not have the future they first imagined NAS (No Date). All the siblings are bilingual, this requires leaders and practitioners to have an appreciation and understanding of the unique characteristics of their cultural heritage and language (Chamers and Crisfield, 2019). However, a lack of staff training in how to support barriers in communication be that SEND or EAL maybe challenges to inclusion of these children NAS (No Date). EMAS (No Date) posit that schools have a responsibility to promote language diversity as it can strengthen the basics of language development and avoid future barriers such as speech delay. Therefore, leaders need consider both early implementation of strategies and inclusive practices that support development, educational needs and when raising attainment for vulnerable children (EEF, 2019, EEF, 2020 and Abbot et al 2015).

Leader can develop whole school inclusive practices that acknowledge the importance of identity and language through enacting UNCRC when implementing strategies, Article 30 of the UNCRC, children also have the right to be heard and right to their own identity in Articles 12 and 8 of the UNCRC (Children Commissioner for Wales, 2024). Inclusive practitioners and leaders to build these relationships with families and children thus feeling heard and able share what is important to them (EYFS, 2024). Article 30 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to use their own language, culture and religion – even if these are not used by not people in the country where they live, and article 8 expresses the right of children to their own identity (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2024). However, Murry, 2019 warns that Article 12 is acted upon depending on the child's age and maturity and does not start at birth. In recent years the Children's Commissioner (2017) added that Article 12, 'States parties should presume that a child has the capacity to form her or his own views and recognize that she or he has the right to express them' however this statement is guidance and not legally binding. As Murry (2019) asserts to strengthen inclusion leaders must 'actively' listen to the views of children if they are to fully understand them and could even use these views to inform policy and include the child's voice.

Family

Pen Green (2018) suggests that a family's views, wishes and feelings should be known to understand the uniqueness of each child, what motivate and interests them, and that parents and careers should be encouraged to participate in their child's education. Thomson and Simmons (2023) posit that as inclusive leaders we need to challenge concepts of 'hard to reach' families, where parents and careers struggle to have their voices heard and instead review policies and practice. McWayne et al (2022) claims that parents tend to accept the processes of settings, believing that their child will settle and thrive. To become more inclusive in practice and welcoming to all family's leaders

should consider starting at home rather than the setting to get an understanding of what is impacting children and families (Thomson and Simmons, 2023).

The family in the case study has many complex needs, there is a lone parent caring for five children, who maybe under the impression that the setting is doing all it can to support the children and encourage partnership. It is important that we challenge the thinking in McWayne et al (2022) paper and address perspectives of families that might become marginalized because of preconceptions or experiences of education settings (Thomson and Simmons, 2023). DHSC (2021) document for 'Best Start for Life' sets out key actions including family support and an empowered workforce that recognises and meets the needs of all families including those from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, the continual improvement of education and leadership for change. For these to be enacted it might help leaders to consider Nixon's (2018) analogy of a coin for social structures of privilege, states that one side of the coin is unearned advantage and privilege to some and the other side is unearned disadvantage and oppression for others and how as inclusive leaders striving for equity need to recognise our influence and how the two sides coin effect one another.

When concerns arise around Tudor needs leaders can ensure that a Graduated Response is taken, allowing the father to share his own knowledge and insights of Tudor and be included in the process when forming support strategies (Pen Green, 2018) supporting that the father is an expert on his child. Leaders should invite open conversations about assumptions and unconscious bias around working with fathers and parenting styles with practitioners, fathers feel accepted when settings exhibit respectful curiosity and as part of this leaders need to be aware of their own attitudes and biases (Head Start, 2025), when communicating with Mr Dalca it might be helpful to for staff to learn key phrases in his home language and plan activities designed for fathers and invite feedback. Norheim and Moser (2020) also suggest translating letters into home languages, having bilingual practitioners and translators for parent-teacher meetings. High quality interactions between fathers and settings can make a difference, when fathers that are valued and included by receiving support that enhances their skills and bespoke to their wishes and aims, they are more inclined to be motivated to be engaged with the settings (Anderson, StGeorge and Roggman, 2015). EEF (2021) found that parental engagement can positively impact on average 4 months additional progress, crucial in relation to our case study and important when considering how to engage all families.

Professionals

Along with parent partnership, relationships and communication between professionals and multi-agencies can have a direct impact on the environments in which children need succeed (Owen, 2021 and Candy, 2020).The 'pedagogical' practice is often assigned solely to the learning environment; however, practitioners need to make

environments inclusive and reflect social justice by the removal of structural and cultural barriers to learning and participation, meaning that practitioners cannot work in isolation (Pantic and Florian, 2015). Leaders can support practitioners through coaching or mentoring to develop skills such as reflexivity to adopt to a more inclusive practices in their teams (Ivanova, 2020). However, Hansen et al. (2021) found limitations to inclusion are often lay in the nature of settings, in his study of 6 schools, practitioners focused on children's barriers rather than adapting practice. Mezirow's 'Transformative Learning Theory' as cited in Lundgren and Poell (2016) states the process reflection is defined by consciousness and critical consciousness meaning happens through reflective action and critical thinking, therefore as inclusive leaders need also be self-aware to understand their impact on others. Mezirow work was influenced by Dewey who defined reflection as acting with consideration based upon knowledge gained instead of acting blindly or taking impulsive action (McCabe and Thejll-Madsen 2020, Lundgren and Poell, 2016). An inclusive pedagogical approach therefore challenges embedded views in practice and explores with purpose how other professional expertise can assist practitioners to adapt practice to support all children (Pantic and Florian, 2015).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems put the child and their cultural influences at the centre of our practice, cultural inclusion is not an option but essential part of inclusive practice (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2022), when considering the case study this includes parent partnership, adapting resources and collaboration with multi-agencies. Scully-Russ and Boyle (2018) state that settings also play a significant role in promoting a culture of equity, tolerance and diversity adopting a holistic approach to understanding all children. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasises how a child's social interactions impact their learning and development from a holistic standpoint. Furthermore, are leaders creating an inclusive environment for practitioners? by meeting their needs as seen Maslow's hierarchy, including their physiological safety the ability to express views openly, social needs of belonging and esteem needs such as respect, therefore practitioners are ready to meet these same needs for children (Lewis, 2024 and Silver, Ellinas and Augustus-Wallace, 2024). A leader might meet some of these need through training, training in the effects of trauma on children development and how to adopt a strengths-based approach to support families to consider what they can do to encourage the healthy development of their child (NSPCC, 2025) could help Mr Dalcua but would also support practitioner's self-esteem and confidence.

Holmes et al. (2021) states, leaders that are compassionate create a sense of inclusion. Shuck et al (2019) posits inclusive leadership requires qualities of integrity, accountability, empathy, authenticity and dignity, these are comparable to Goleman's leadership styles which requires leaders to demonstrate skills emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2019). Inclusive leaders understand barriers to their team's experience such as workload, stress and timetables (DfE, 2024, Douglas- Osborn et al. 2021)..

Ramachandran et al. (2024) asserts compassionate leaders are more inclined to notice disadvantage from a range of diverse identities and are better able in the removal barriers and improve wellbeing of those concerned by taking positive actions that promote inclusion and acknowledge the value of diversity.

Community

Epstein et al. (2018) refers to the school-family-community partnership model, emphasizing how settings, families and communities come together to collaboratively effect the learning and development of children as overlapping spheres of influence, which were inspired by Bronfenbrenner's (Pound, 2019) ecological model. Government initiatives such as Local Offer, provide information about services that support families with children and young people aged 0-25 years who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (DfE, 2018) also support this model as lots of the resources available are community based and school professionals such as family support workers can support families connect with these services (Stefanski, Valli and Jacobson, 2016) . Epstein et al. (2018) assets that partnership between microsystems creates a coherence in a child's learning and caregiving environment.

Thomas (2024) explains that settings with family support officers can provide several different services including, parent and toddler groups, home visits and the setting up of an Elsa family project that looks at the emotional wellbeing of families. All of these could potentially support the family in the case study, Thomas (2024) also talks about links with other professionals such as local doctors, community police, and charities and build further community links through their 'Dock leaf' project which encourages volunteers from community to work and gain qualifications at the same time. The flexibility of this setting shows that it is possible to meet needs across a community, the inclusion of a father group or building connections with charities such as Dad's House and Gingerbread, could offer support to lone parents but in particular fathers who might be experiencing isolation and loneliness due to bereavement or family breakdown (Dad's House, 2024, Gringerbread, 2024)

A report by Cattan et al. (2022) found huge inequalities in home environments for children and how these impacted upon their socioemotional and cognitive development coming out of the global pandemic and entering the cost-of-living crisis. Thomas (2024) states that their school can offer the use of washing machines or lifts to hospital appointments. Some setting have food banks and swop shops for nearly new clothing and uniform (Bradbury and Vince, 2025). The UK currently has approximately 30% of children living in poverty (Cribb et al., 2024) , setting leaders can offer some support to these children through collaboration with communities, as seen in Prembrooke Dock Community (Thomas, 2024).

Conclusion

Feldman (2021) states that leaders should be guardians and facilitators of an inclusive culture, as it necessary for them to be able to reflect on themselves and their impact on others and to acknowledge how they work with groups and systems in which they lead or influence. Herb Kelleher said “Culture is what people do when no one is looking” meaning that the values and ethos of a setting are observed and align with the actions of all concerned (Franz, 2019).

Part 2

SEND Policy and guidance and inclusive leadership

In this section I shall be evaluating my settings SEND policy and looking at its use of language and exploring how the policy enables and support inclusivity for children and their families and how inclusive leadership support staff in the early years setting.

Fitzgerald and Kay (2016) asserts that even the word 'policy' may have different meanings, however, policies tend to have common themes including, belongingness: a policy tend to belong to departments or settings, commitment: a policy has commitment to an action, status: in that it is formally owned or adopted by a setting and policies have specificity: that is a policy will set out specific details of for example procedures. Dallimore (2019) states that even though early years settings are regulated and prioritise policy in the setting, there is little in the way of consistency in how these policies are conceived and delivered. The Key (2024) recommends a checklist for SEND policies, this checklist potentially addresses some of these inconsistencies found by Dallimore (2019), The Key (2024) recommends that a SEND policy should cover aspects such as the settings values and vision, how the policy was developed and who developed.

The language that is used in school policies is important because it has a direct effect on children, families and staff, it has the capacity to limit access to education children deserve and realise their full potential, clear and accessible language enables children access to education (Forbes and Morea, 2024). The Bell Foundation (2025) explains that parent's engagement is critical to their child's learning and success, however families using English as an Additional Language (EAL) will often come across barriers if they are new to English or have limited proficiency. This will impact how parents access aspects of school such as policies and practice. which is an important part of understanding a schools procedures and structures and decision making (The Bell Foundation, 2025). The language that is used in school policies is important because it has a direct effect on children, families and staff, it has the capacity to limit access to education children deserve and realise their full potential, clear and accessible language enables children access to education (Forbes and Morea, 2024).

The Braunstone Frith (2024) SEND policy has been written in simple English language with only few technical terms, but these have brief and simple descriptions and very few abbreviations and the abbreviations that are in the policy are repeated several times with a corresponding definition, this is similar to the SEND code of practice (2024). For example, the term 'graduated response' is used early on in the document under the roles and responsibilities of the SENCO it is established they will advise on the 'graduated response to providing SEN support...' at this it does not state who with or how this works. However later in the document there is a complete breakdown of the

‘graduated approach’ who and what involves. It might be helpful to some parents or other professionals not familiar with this term to have a reference stating look at section 8.3 for full details. However, it is worth noting that there is no way translating the policy document on the website by means of for example by using Google Translate.

A reason for this might be is to avoid and minimise the risk of misinterpretation of important information around processes of practice or assessment (Gov.UK, 2021). House (2023) posits their a few reasons that translation of documents may be difficult including cultural nuance stating that translation is better when done by a person of the same or familiar with the cultural background of the native language needed and precision, subject expertise and precision some policies such as SEND require specialist knowledge and experience to understand them so it is important that the translation be this in print or one to one, reflects the original documents information. Having local community members translates as well as interpreters can be empowering for communities, notes (Taibi, 2024) but again this can lead to disparities in information relayed as the person translating has not been part of the process of making the policy and might not be aware of the settings values and practices. There are also possible ethical reasons for not having a translator or Interpreter and parents’ consent should also ways be sort before accessing this resource. A North Yorkshire County Council document (2011) suggests that Leaders consider any other formats when publishing policies to make the policies them more accessible, ideas such as other languages, large print, Braille, cassette, arranging a meeting to discuss the policies and procedures in depth with parents or staff who cannot access the policies in other ways and ensuring that spare hard copies of policies and procedures within the setting so that they can be loaned out to parents or staff.

NASEN (2020) asserts that as SENCO as leader of inclusion, these professionals have influence over values, cultures and ethos of setting, it is imperative that SENCO’s therefore give careful consideration the used in policies and procedures they influence to avoid generalisations and are ready to challenge attitudes and bias that do not align with the settings values and ethos. The SEND policy (Braunstone Frith, 2024) also states the SENCO will provide regular training for staff and continuously monitor to identify staff that require specific training needs. This description around training does not give details specific training maybe because mainstream setting are now required to support many and multiple different needs, the UK government (2024) announced at the end of year that £740 million capital would be invested in mainstream schools to support more specialist places for children requiring SEND provision, the funding is to support schools to adapt facilities and make classrooms more accessible, it is important to note that nothing has been said about the additional training that might also be required to support these children. Nonetheless, a recent article produced by the House of Lords Collyer-Meritt (2024) stated that many early year settings and schools lacked the capacity, resources and in some instances, the expertise to meet the needs of many

SEND children, the result being more families seeking ECHP's and places with special provisions such as Designated Specialist Provisions, another article in School Week as cited in Collyer-Meritt (2024) also highlighted challenges to resources claiming that settings did not have the sufficient funding or training for staff.

“By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes” – Global Goals for Sustainable Development, 2015, Goal 4.1 cited in UNICEF (2018)

This quote seems to be unattainable with various global reports, including those by UNICEF (2018) continue to highlight social inequalities that children are experiencing, some of the world's wealthiest countries are finding that children are experiencing difficulties in attainment for circumstances beyond their control, these including being born into poverty and the language they speak. UNICEF (2018) state that these children are starting their education on a backfooting and may fall even further behind because policies and practices are reinforcing this disadvantage rather than closing the gap leading to social injustice and inequality. This is why governments and settings continue to evolve policies to address issues including, poverty and rights of the poor, vulnerable and marginalised people and the empowerment of women and girls. In the UK, the Equality Act (2010) aims to protect children, young adults and vulnerable groups against discrimination, harassment and victimisation, early years settings have a responsibility uphold this legislation. Public sector bodies such as schools and early years setting have a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act (2010), leaders need to take active steps eliminate discrimination and should be ensuring that their setting are promoting equality for all families and professionals. SENCO's and other inclusive leaders might want to take a mixed methods approach when examining the effectiveness of strategies being used to support SEND children as this approach could reveal critical insight about pedagogy and support that might prove invaluable to future policy reviews and practice according to Siraj-Blachford et al. (2006).

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