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Section 1

What is Inclusive leadership?

Inclusive leadership means having the ability to lead a group of heterogeneous people efficiently, be able to be an inspiring role model while mentoring other practitioners, to lead by example, while respecting the uniqueness of everyone in an empathetic, bias-free way. Inclusive leadership is important as it brings together diverse perspectives, which can enhance creativity, innovation and problem solving (Siraj–Blatchford and Hallett, 2014, p.17). A diverse team make better decisions than a homogeneous one as there is different viewpoints which can lead to a more comprehensive solutions and better decision making (Ferdman, 2021). It creates an environment where all employees feel valued and respected, which boosts morale, engagement, job satisfaction, navigating changes better and uncertainties by leveraging a wider range of skills and experiences (Booyesen, 2014; Randel *et al.*, 2018).

A sense of inclusion increases employee motivation and commitment, leading to higher performance and productivity. It fosters a culture of respect and understanding, reducing conflicts and misunderstandings creating a more harmonious working environment. Employees are more likely to go beyond when they feel included and appreciated (Bourke and Titus, 2020). Inclusive teams are better equipped to understand and deal with the needs of a diverse situation and families due to the strengths and weaknesses of each member of staff taken into consideration (Booyesen, 2014, p.306). Promoting inclusivity helps settings comply with the legal requirements related to diversity and anti-discrimination, by following policies, guidelines, procedures, ethical standards, and social responsibilities which enhance the settings reputation (Rock, *et al.*, 2016).

An inclusive leader takes responsibility to model and implement an effective practice by reflecting on the effectiveness of the provision, makes necessary changes, implements new relevant policies, improves practice through appropriate professional development, championing children's rights and anti-discriminatory by promoting equality of opportunity and understanding all relevant legislation, policies and statutory frameworks that apply to early years (Hadfield *et al.*, 2015).

The scenario

A young child called Yasmin a refugee who fled Syria due to war has come to live in Wales. Yasmin was granted a place in a nursery which was attended for a few weeks but has suddenly stopped coming with no explanation. One of the practitioners has observed that she liked to play independently but did try to make new friends with others. It has come to the attention of the practitioner that Yasmin was being bullied during playtime by other children for being different and has minimal understanding of English. The practitioner is not sure if the other members of staff have noticed or has made the connection therefore, a staff meeting has been arranged, and all the staff have now been made aware. The parents have been contacted and a meeting has been set up to discuss the situation with the help of an

interpreter, at the setting and an action plan has been put in place of how the staff and the setting can support Yasmin and the family moving forward.

Children

According to Article 22 of United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a child who has a refugee status should receive the appropriate protection and assistance to enjoy all the rights in the Convention (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, an inclusive leader has the responsibility of taking the safety and wellbeing of everybody involved in the setting seriously and work to prevent any intolerant behaviour (Bortini *et al.*, 2018). In the setting an Inclusion and Opportunity Policy is adopted and implemented, and its aim is to support and give every child the opportunity to experience a good and happy early years' experience, whatever the child's needs or background. It allows the setting to show respect, to celebrate all that is unique about each child, to learn and understand the needs of children from every ethnic background as defined in section 9(2) of the Equality Act 2010, giving the upmost consideration to the language or languages spoken at home, social, cultural, and religious customs (Slee, 2019).

Children of refugees may encounter difficulties understanding and learning a second language, overcoming a trauma, adjusting to a new culture, and dealing with racism

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and prejudice (Alrawashdeh and Kunt 2022). Refugees require extra support for many reasons, such as dealing with new people and a new setting (Popov and Stureson, 2015; Alrawashdoh and Kunt, 2022). Refugees face sociocultural challenges due to diverse backgrounds and finding difficulty to interact with others confidently. Racism harms and distort learning opportunities as demonstrated in first-hand accounts in the Show us you care report and according to the research there is an implementation gap between evidence, informed policy making and what is happening in educational settings in Wales (Race Alliance Wales 2021).

Bullying can often occur when children are not of the same race, religion, social class, do not wear appropriate clothing or do not share in the same values or pastimes as peers (Hughes and Davies, 2019, p. 26). However, under the Equalities Act 2010, culture appreciation should be fostered in all settings and where possible different cultures should be explored, making the experience a learning opportunity to listen and understand the beliefs and traditions not for personal gain but to honour the culture and the people (Preemptivelove, 2020; Cruz *et al.*, 2023).

The setting needs to utilise a child centred approach, this is recommended in the guidelines of the new curriculum for Wales, where the child's voice, feeling and thoughts are considered. This may provide solutions and have excellent ideas of how to solve issues through discussions with other children, staff, and adults promoting effective relationships (Welsh Government, 2022a; Welsh Government, 2020).

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory the environment in which a child grows up in has an immense impact on development and many influences such as nursery settings, family and home environment contributes to the child's holistic experiences. It is important that the child is kept at the heart of the situation (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022, p. 20). Yasmin's situation may be discussed with the children and other parents, with the parents' permission, and an explanation to why Yasmin and family have moved to live in Wales. This should be explained in a child friendly way, so all the children understand. Introducing diverse toys and books in the setting to represent different culture and backgrounds will help Yasmin feel at home in the nursery and for other children to understand about diverse cultures. Parents may be

invited to attend a session and read a book in Arabic with the aid of an interpreter due to the family having minimal understanding of English,

Educating children regarding diverse cultures in early years fosters an early positive moral opinion regarding diversity as children inherit cultural values by interacting with the surroundings (Fleer, 2017; Yang *et al.*, 2022). This can be achieved further by introducing culture days of celebrating in settings and in the community, this will foster good relationships between families and the community.

Families

Stratigos *et al.*, (2014) and Guo and Dalli (2016) both states belonging is a fundamental human need which forms the basis for contributing to society and is the drive to learn about how to be and behave in a new cultural setting.

Brooker (2014) describes belonging as a process and the initial task is to develop a sense of belonging, this is achieved through the curriculums implemented in educational settings. An inclusive leader will recognise that Cynefin plays an important part in the New Curriculum for Wales which was inspiration by Te Whariki curriculum in New Zealand, where children families and the community all play an important part in achieving a sense of belonging (Ministry of Education, 2024).

According to Mitchell and Bateman (2018) the process of supporting belonging through early childhood education, especially where diverse cultural are present, requires understanding and negotiation, are not well understood. This is certainly the case for refugees' children and families who have been displaced from home countries. The feeling of belonging is a particular challenge for the families however, the advantages is that pedagogy which incorporates cultural constructs that refugee families bring, strengthens a sense of belonging and this must be acknowledged to foster inclusiveness.

Families may face a barrier in reporting a racist incident due to the perception that the setting may not follow through with the complaint. Similarly, the family may not have the knowledge and awareness of processes to report (Race Alliance Wales,

2021). Although the Welsh Government anti-bullying guidance is accessible on the website, families may not have access to the internet and it is also unclear how it works in practice, under varied local authorities and education settings across Wales.

Practitioners/Professionals

Early years settings and practitioners play a crucial role in shaping children's opportunities and to experience belonging due to inclusive and welcoming environment (Johansson and Puroila, 2021). Research shows that the experience of belonging is important for children's development, identities and overall, wellbeing (Guo and Dali, 2016; Over, 2016; Kustatscher, 2017).

There are concerns regarding children being excluded, studies show that even young children may confront rejection, discrimination or bullying in early years settings and in the community (Jenkins, 2017). Therefore, practitioners should treat any discriminatory behaviour or bullying seriously and should bring the situation to the attention of the leader (Welsh Government, 2023).

According to Bourke and Titus (2019) an inclusive leader should adopt an Inclusive approach, putting together a diverse team, avoiding favouritism among team members. Building trust so everyone feels comfortable speaking up. Empowering teams to manage demanding situations and being ready to help address conflict if needed.

The practitioner that observed Yasmin has arranged a meeting to discuss her observations with the other staff in accordance with guidelines set out in the National Minimum Standards, where it states all concerns needs to be reported and discussed (Welsh Government, 2023).

The Welsh Government expects settings to work with children, families, community and sharing any information and ideas with professionals to ensure the right support against racism and bullying is reported at the right time to ensure the best outcomes for the children who are black, Asian or of ethnic minority (Race Alliance Wales 2021; Welsh Government 2022b). However, Race Alliance Wales (2021) also states there

is a gap between policies, anti-bullying guidelines and implementation and a lack of processes to report a racist incident. Moreover, literature shows that policies are available for settings to adopt but continues to fall short when it comes to supporting children who experience racism.

The report also stated that practitioners lacked training and understanding of racism and 70% of 435 teachers did not feel confident enough to report an incident and lacked understanding what racism or what a racist incident is. The lack of awareness particularly practitioners from rural settings who for example, may display limited understanding of European Union rules, and migrants' rights to education, thereby inadvertently disadvantaging young children. The current representation of racialised people in education settings is incredibly low in Wales and this may be the cause of the lack of understanding, by default. Show Racism the red card (2020 p. 43) also agrees, and there is a lack of training regarding anti-racism in Wales and more training is a recommended priority.

In addition, practitioners did not know what a racist incident is, the difference between friendly banter and serious incident and were also actively discouraged from proceeding with reports and was told that recording the incident or incidents may affect Local Authority targets (Race Alliance Wales, 2021).

To implement a successful inclusive curriculum, practitioners need to work as a team, to be knowledgeable, receive appropriate training to develop and foster opportunities for creativity and innovation, communicate effectively, be adaptable and flexible with any situation within the setting to make children and staff feel they belong (Halse, 2018). However, the lack of appropriate knowledge and skills may cause challenges with resourcing, implementing curriculum and policies successfully (Adebayo and Ngwenya, 2015; Piskur *et al.*, 2017). Guo and Dali (2016) states that belonging is becoming a worldwide goal in curriculums especially in early years settings therefore, appropriate training is essential.

Communities

Where belonging has become a priority in the curriculum implemented in a setting, research has shown this has also increased in the community where children feel included in community activities (Peers and Fler, 2014).

However, The Welsh Government has taken steps to decolonise the curriculum, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities Contributions and Cynefin in the New Curriculum Working Group reviewed representation within the education system and sought the views of young people the changes needed for a fairer and a more accurate representation and contributions of a racialised communities in Wales. The findings included there is lack of representation in settings and in the community (Race Alliance Wales, 2021).

The tireless efforts of community members, grassroots organisations such as rugby and football teams and charities in Wales who have an obligation to be inclusive can foster a sense of belonging and the opportunity to meet other children and families by building a networking group within the community (Sport and Recreation Alliance, 2018). Making parents aware of what is also available locally and in the community such as Early years hubs, workshops, clubs, parent classes may decrease the sense of loneliness within a new community.

Moreover, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is a pioneering law that aims to improve the social, economic, environment and cultural well-being of Wales as a whole, and that future generations have the same quality or better quality of life moving forward. The act provides for better decision-making by considering a long-term view of situations, helping to prevent problems occurring or getting worse and to progress towards becoming a more equal Wales fostering a holistic approach ensures sustainable development and a better quality of life for current and future generations in Wales regardless of background.

In conclusion, inclusive leadership is important in harnessing the power of diverse perspectives, enhances employee engagement and retention, drives better decision making and boosts performance and productivity. It ensures compliance with legal and ethical standards, reduces workplace conflict, and fosters adaptability and

resilience. Ultimately, inclusive leadership is essential for creating a dynamic, supportive, and successful workplace that benefits, children, families, professionals, and communities.

Section 2

The New Curriculum for Wales

The New Curriculum for Wales framework which includes the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings is a key policy aimed at fostering inclusive leadership in early years provision. This curriculum is designed to be inclusive, supporting the development of all children, regardless of background, abilities, or needs (Welsh Government, 2020; Welsh Government, 2022a). However, Adebayo and Ngwenya (2015) and Piskur *et al.*, (2017) both states some settings may be resistant to change, preferring existing methods over new inclusive approaches.

The curriculum aligns with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 2019), promoting the well-being and rights of every child. Leaders are guided to create settings where every child feels valued, safe, and included (HM Government, 2023). HM Government (2023) also states children in an early year's setting may not have experienced being away from parents or carers such as grandparents, therefore it is everybody's responsibility to acknowledge the experiences each child brings to the setting by working in partnership with the child, parents and carers by offering support when needed.

The curriculum emphasises on a child-centred approach, ensuring that the learning and development needs of every child are met through observations focusing on the needs and interests. This approach encourages leaders to create inclusive environments that respect and respond to the diverse needs of all children (Welsh Government, 2022a; Department for Education, 2024b).

It recognises that every child is unique and with the knowledge and the experience of all practitioners, individual needs are respected and met. These are achieved by collaborating with relevant professionals, sharing information, and looking for

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opportunities to use skills, expertise, and knowledge to provide the best support and inclusive practice and achieving a holistic and meaningful learning at the setting (HM Government, 2023).

The policy highlights the importance of recognising and valuing diversity and promoting equity. Leaders are encouraged to implement practices that support the inclusion of all children, including children with additional learning needs or from diverse cultural backgrounds (Department for Education, 2024a). However, Piskur *et al.*, (2017) research found the lack of appropriate training, knowledge and skills may impact practitioners with providing suitable resources and implementing an inclusive curriculum successfully.

Effective planning is achieved through a whole-setting approach such as discussions and teamwork, this allows practitioners to develop an appropriate inclusive use of the environment and available resources. This supports to develop rich learning environments, resulting in children's interests being met and helping further engagements of development and learning (Welsh Government, 2022a).

According to Wong *et al.*, (2024) a successful inclusive leader is an inspiring role model, identifying own weaknesses and strengths and understands the importance of own continual professional learning and supports practitioners ongoing professional development and well-being. This includes training on inclusive practices, enabling leaders to effectively support team members in creating inclusive learning environments (Ashikali *et al.*, 2020).

These qualities support the skills needed to regular monitor and assess practice. This is achieved through adopting, personalising, implementing, and reviewing the settings policies such as the Inclusion and Opportunity Policy, ensuring it is effective and fit for purpose. The aim of the policy is to support and give every child the opportunity to take advantage of an early years' experience, whatever the child's needs or background (DfES, 2003; Welsh Government, 2023).

However, settings may experience some barriers and challenges such as, the organisation having a pre-existing bias deeply rooted in the organisational structure, making change difficult, lack of knowledge about diversity and inclusion resulting in training needed, this has been championed by Liz Pemberton from the 'The Black

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Nursery Manager', over the last few years. Organisations may not fully understand how the policy can improve performance of staff, insufficient funds to implement the policies fully, communication challenges if the staff is multilingual and unable to understand the policy, legal and compliance concerns the fear of litigation can make settings hesitant to implement some policies (Hudson *et al.*, 2018).

The setting's environment should be well organised ensuring accessibility for all. Including a diverse and authentic representation within resources, such as images and text for example, ability, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Adapting the environment to remove barriers so all children can participate in all activities and offer open-ended resources that reflect diversity and are not gender specific (Department for Education, 2024b).

Promoting an inclusive leadership recognises, promotes, and values the diversity of children and families by respecting and responding to needs. It ensures all involved receive equitable treatment, opportunities, respect, and representation (Welsh Government, 2020). Implementing inclusive leadership and practice ensures children have a sense of belonging, valued and equal opportunities to thrive and celebrate. It is important that children feel confident in themselves and to be proud. However, (Ashikali *et al.*, 2020) states addressing the barriers requires a comprehensive, strategic approach, including a strong inclusive leadership commitment, training, accountability a clear understanding of policies and measurement of every action.

In conclusion, the Curriculum for Wales is a powerful tool for enabling inclusive leadership in early years provision. By embedding principles of equity, personalised learning, and holistic development, it ensures all children are given the opportunity to reach full potential. Inclusive leaders play a crucial role in actualising the vision, creating environments where diversity is celebrated, every child is valued, and learning is a joyful and inclusive experience. Through ongoing professional development, community engagement, and a commitment to reflective practice, early years practitioners can lead the way in fostering an inclusive educational landscape.

Section 3

Blog

Inclusive leadership in early years settings is crucial for fostering an environment where every child feels valued, supported, and empowered to reach full potential (Welsh Government, 2020; Bush, 2012) I. As the foundation of a child's educational journey, early years settings play a pivotal role in shaping attitudes and behaviours towards diversity and inclusion (Wood, 2020).

According to Siraj-Blatchford (2014) Inclusive leaderships begin with a clear commitment to diversity and inclusion, leaders should articulate and model values in every aspect of the setting. This includes creating policies that promote equality, celebrating cultural differences, and ensuring that all staff and children feel respected and valued. Regular training on cultural competency and anti-bias education can equip staff with the necessary skills to support an inclusive environment (Department for Education, 2024a).

An inclusive leader fosters a culture of collaboration and mutual support. This can be achieved by encouraging open communication and active listening among staff, children, and families (Hadfield *et al.*, 2015). Leaders should create forums for discussion where everybody feels safe to express thoughts and ideas (Bush, 2012). By valuing diverse perspectives and fostering a sense of belonging, leaders can build a strong, inclusive community (Ashikali *et.*, 2020).

An inclusive curriculum that reflects the diversity of the community is essential in an early year setting (Knight and Crick, 2021). Leaders should ensure that learning materials, books, and activities represent a variety of cultures, abilities, and family structures. This not only helps children see themselves reflected in their learning but also teaches the children to appreciate and respect differences in others (Cunningham *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 states providing resources and support for children with special educational needs or disabilities is crucial for full participation and inclusion.

Inclusive leaders set the tone for the setting through the actions taken. Leaders should demonstrate inclusive behaviour in decision making processes, interactions, and problem-solving approaches (Ashikali et al., 2020). By leading with empathy, respect, and fairness, it models the values the leader wishes to infuse in the staff and children. This leadership style fosters trust and encourages others to adopt similar behaviour (Wong *et al.*, 2024).

Involving families and the wider community in the life of the setting is essential for promoting inclusion. Leaders should build strong relationships with families, seeking input and feedback on how to create a more inclusive environment. Organising events that celebrate the diverse cultures and traditions of the community can also enhance understanding and appreciation among children and families (The Black Nursery Manager, no date).

Inclusive leadership requires ongoing learning and development. Leaders should invest in continuous professional development opportunities for personal benefit and for the staff (Wong *et al.*, 2024). This could include workshops, seminars, and courses of topics such as inclusive education practices, cultural competency, and leadership skills. Staying informed about the latest research and the best practice in inclusion ensures that leaders can effectively support the staff and children.

Regular reflection and assessments are key to sustaining an inclusive environment. Leaders should establish mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of the inclusion strategies and making necessary adjustments. This could involve collecting feedback from staff, children, and families, and using this data to inform practice this may be achieved from a Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS) as part of the Quality-of-care report (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2024). Reflective practice helps leaders identify areas for improvement and celebrate successes, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Therefore, promoting inclusive leadership in early years settings is a dynamic and ongoing. By embracing diversity and inclusion as core values, fostering a collaborative culture, providing inclusive curriculum and resources, leading by example. Engaging families and the community, investing in professional

development, and reflecting on practices, leaders can create environments where every child feels valued and empowered. This not only benefits the children but also enriches the entire community, laying the foundation for a more inclusive society.

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