

Section 1

The role of the inclusive leader in an early years setting is to actively promote and implement practices to ensure that all children, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities have equal opportunities to learn, grow and participate. (Casey, 2010). By doing this the inclusive leader ensures that a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere is created so that diversity is celebrated and all children feel valued and included. This includes ensuring celebrations reflect the diverse backgrounds, cultures and family structures of the children. This is done by making sure that all activities and equipment are adapted to meet the needs of all the children who attend. (Tembo and Nenham, 2023)

The inclusive leader promotes equity to ensure that all children have access to the same opportunities and materials to meet their individual needs. This includes providing additional support for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and those from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as children with language barriers. (Glazzard *et al.*, 2019)

Glazzard *et al.* (2019) emphasises how the respect and acceptance of children's fundamental human rights enables the children to be part of their community but also that it is acceptable to be different but equal. Glazzard *et al.* (2019) also mentions how every child should not be treated in the same way but in a way that is suited to their individual needs as every child is a unique child and should be provided with equitable opportunities but individual to them. When inclusion in early years is thought about it is often in relation to children who may have a disability. However it needs to be considered just as much for children who are from different cultures, speak a different language, and from socio-economic backgrounds when thinking of inclusion and it needs to be acknowledged that as well as needs children have rights especially in the context of play. (Edwards *et al*, 2011 and Moyles, 2014).

Policies and procedures that support inclusion are used and the inclusive leader ensures that they are kept up to date with current legislation and best practices relating to inclusion and diversity in the setting.

Every child is unique and their needs individually assessed so that additional staffing support or adapted equipment can be provided.

According to Siraj-Blatchford & Hallet (2014) it is considered that the style of leadership of women is likely to be democratic or participative and the job role as a more caring leadership. Newstead and Isles-Buck (2019) state how inclusive

practice is paramount to a successful early years provision and as well as making everyone who attends feel welcome, valued and respected it is the role of the manager to be a role model and to ensure that inclusive practice is adhered to in the setting.

It is the role of the inclusive leader to encourage professional development and to ensure it is available and provided to the staff to furthermore their development, understanding and implementation of inclusive practices. (Naraian, 2017) Training for the staff can include effective communication with diverse families and cultural competence. However the inclusive leader does not only work with the practitioners to support an inclusive approach but also works collaboratively with families and the wider community. This encourages forming positive relationships and partnerships that facilitate a holistic approach to inclusion. Using reflective practice continually to reflect and evaluate the practice of themselves and also the early years practitioners will help the inclusive leader identify areas for development and improvement in promoting inclusion. (Hallet, 2016 and Naraian, 2017)

A child aged 3 years old recently joined the early years setting. His name is Harry and his parents are a same-sex couple. Harry has two fathers. The children in the setting are invited to bring in photographs of their families to go on the family wall. Harry brings in a photograph of his two fathers and brother and explains the photograph is from his birthday party. Some children ask why Harry has two fathers and where his mother is. Some members of staff expressed some concerns as they did not know how to answer the questions and also some parents have shown confusion about how to deal with questions that may be asked from their children about Harry's family. Some parents have also expressed their uneasiness of the discussion of same sex families within the setting. There are also times in the session that Harry's family is not included in discussions such as at circle time and during certain activities which involve certain family members and this is leading to Harry having feelings of exclusion.

It is the role of the inclusive leader to create an inclusive environment and to ensure that the environment reflects all forms of diversity including family structures. Also to ensure that all children, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities have equal

opportunities to learn, grow and participate. A welcome background must be created so diversity can be celebrated and all children feel valued and included. This included adapting activities and the environment to meet the needs of every single child attending as each child is unique. This can be achieved by having books, posters and activities that depict different types of families including those with same-sex parents. Reading the books with the children and discussing them will help the children understand and also gives them the opportunities to ask questions and talk openly about children having two mothers or two fathers. This can be done when Harry is present as he can join in with the discussions and also can ask any questions he may want to regarding the other children's families also. Receiving feedback from staff and families is useful about how inclusive the environment is. Tembo and Benham (2023) state how practitioners in early years should ensure that children are taught positively and not negatively with the gendered and heteronormative beliefs which could have a negative impact on them and also encourage change to ensure there is a heightened focus on LGBTQ+ and gender inclusion.

The inclusive leader should support training for practitioners and arrange training on diversity and inclusion, implementing inclusive practices including specifically addressing issues relating to LGBTQ+ families. This includes training on cultural competence and effective communication with diverse families. By doing these training sessions staff should feel confident to deal with questions and discussions about the different family structures and be able to do this sensitively and in the appropriate manner. The success of these sessions can be evaluated by measuring the change in staff attitudes and how comfortable they are when discussing and speaking about LGBTQ+ topics.

By speaking with the parents of Harry, the inclusive leader can understand their perspectives and any specific needs or concerns they may have. Having an open and respectful communication ongoing with them is crucial for supporting the family and adopting a welcoming environment. Having points of contact to get support for parents so that they can be educated and programmes for collaboration with other parents, children and families can prove advantageous in improving the holistic development of the children and supporting their families also (Kamal, 2006). The Playwork Principles for Wales (Play Wales, 2020) argue that children need to be supported in access playing in early years settings and that play is innate.

Supporting this is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 2017) which states how inclusive play is influenced by the rights of the child. The success of this can be monitored by having regular feedback from Harry's parents as to them being happy with the support and communication received by them from the setting. If the parents are receiving positive and proactive communication with the staff then this will put the parents at ease. Children from diverse and cultural backgrounds may face challenges in environments that do not recognise or value their heritage (Cummins, 2017). According to Pidgeon *et al*, (2015) play therapy encourages inclusivity and is successful and used to support family issues and psychosocial issues to name just a couple.

The policies and procedures of the setting are regularly updated by the inclusive leader. This involves keeping the policies and procedures up to date with current legislation and best practices related to inclusion and diversity in early years settings. This should be reflected by ensuring that LGBTQ+ families are included and protected. This involves ensuring that anti-discrimination policies and procedures are clear and that all practitioners understand them and adhere to them at all times. The effectiveness of these policies and procedures can be seen through observing practitioners and monitoring any incidents of discrimination and exclusions. Less incidents and increased inclusivity in the setting shows the success of these policies and procedures. When there is a lack of robust policies and administrative support for inclusive education the effectiveness of inclusive leadership is limited. (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, (2006). According to Gorski (2019), practitioners being biased and stereotyping can create exclusionary environments.

Aswell as the inclusive leader discussing and monitoring inclusivity with the staff, this should be done with the children attending the setting also. During circle time there can be appropriate discussions and activities which promote the understanding and acceptance of diversity among children. This allows the children to ask questions about family structures in an inclusive manner. Following on from these discussions it can be seen by the children's interactions and inclusivity in their play and conversations with their peers their understanding and any forms of negativity towards diversity can be addressed straight away. Positive changes in the children's behaviour and attitudes towards diversity reflect the effectiveness of these discussions and the inclusive leader's actions. According to Moyles (2014) through practitioners showing by example and supporting children, the children can achieve

their zone of proximal development (ZPD) and this is more important to children with social or cultural barriers as they may have experienced trauma such as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). With the correct planning and consideration to resources and support needed, the importance of giving children the freedom to play as they should helps the children to develop empathy and an understanding of society and the world around them (Casey, 2010).

By adopting an inclusive curriculum that reflects diverse cultures, languages and abilities promotes a sense of belonging for all children (Slee, 2018)

Working collaboratively with practitioners, families and the wider community supports an inclusive approach and builds strong relationships and partnerships enabling a holistic approach to inclusion. By engaging the families and communities in the educational process helps build a supportive network for children and reinforces inclusive practices. (Epstein, 2018) Welcoming families and the community to the setting is important and training workshops can be held for them to attend to include inclusivity. Continually reflecting on and evaluating the practices of the setting aids identifies areas for improvement in promoting inclusion. Also implementing technology to help support children can aid their participation and learning. (Edyburn, 2020)

Implementation of inclusive practices can be hindered by insufficient funding and this can cause a barrier to inclusive leadership. (Florian & Beaton, 2018)

In this scenario the inclusive leader plays such an important role in shaping the environment, policies, procedures and practices to support LGBTQ+ families. The actions of the inclusive leader are crucial in creating an inclusive environment providing training for practitioners, engaging with families, implementing policies and supporting children's understanding. The effectiveness of these actions can be evaluated through receiving feedback, observations and monitoring changes in attitudes and behaviours. By critically evaluating the attitudes and behaviours the inclusive leader can continuously improve the inclusivity of the early years setting ensuring all families including those with same-sex parents feel valued and included. When planning inclusive provision in an early years setting, according to the Inclusion Index (Booth *et al*, 2006) consideration should be given to the three key principles which are inclusive cultures, inclusive policies and inclusive practices. Inclusive cultures ensure that a collaborative , motivational, tolerant setting is established with a community that is safe and where every child and adult are

valued. Also inclusive policies where diversity is respected and considered and clear strategies for access and participation are put in place to ensure this happens.

Inclusive practices are also imperative in ensuring that learning activities are developed to support play and these reflect inclusive policies and cultures, which enables all children to use within the setting and be able to participate feeling happy and comfortable as they are unique and respected.

There will always be children who will have barriers whether it be cultural, social, physical, attitudinal or additional learning needs (ALN) stopping them from being able to participate in the early years setting and it is the role of the inclusive leader to ensure that this does not happen and to ensure that these barriers are removed.

Accessibility and Inclusion are the two main principles which the inclusive leader needs to consider when planning for children in the setting (Casey and Harbottle, 2018). However to ensure this is done effectively planning and knowledge is needed to have a positive result within the setting. Whitebread (2012) and Papatheodorou (2010) show from their research that children who hit these barriers and do not access play and the early years settings with barriers such as social or culture class or disabilities are straight away at an disadvantage for their future as it is highly likely to affect their development as well as future relationships so it is imperative that in the early years settings the inclusive leader and all practitioners do their utmost to ensure that these barriers are broken down and that all the children have the best opportunities in life.

Siraj-Blatchford (2006) believes that celebrating diversity in the early years setting is not the way forward but instead to create an awareness that each and every child and person is unique as everyone has a culture, gender or language identity and all have racial and individual ethnic identities also so it should be more accepted as the norm rather than celebrated as being different.

Inclusive leadership in the early years requires recognising and addressing the opportunities and the barriers. Professional development, inclusive curriculum and family engagement offer significant opportunities to enhance inclusion while resource restraints, biases, inadequate policies and cultural barriers pose challenges.

Addressing these issues through comprehensive strategies is crucial for fostering inclusive environments for children in early years.

Section 2

In Wales, there are many policies and professional guidance in early years that cover a range of guidelines, regulations and legislation frameworks. These are designed to ensure the provision of high quality, accessible, safe and inclusive care and education for young children. These policies include health and safety, child protection and safeguarding, additional learning needs (ALN), curriculum and inclusion to name just a few. These policies ensure that children's individual needs are met and that they are kept safe in an environment where they can learn, play and encourage their holistic development. Policies and professional guidance include the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to the age of 12 years and A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings. The National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for Children up to the age of 12 years (NMS) are a one fit all policy and guidance for providers of childcare. These standards provide a regulatory framework for childcare providers ensuring the quality and inclusivity of care. As the heading states 'minimum', therefore these standards can be open to abuse and can be a massive grey area when it comes to providing standards of care to children and young people. The NMS needs to be more in depth and more proactive in regard to different settings and broaden the approach used to ensure that all children and young people are included into society and are supported to receive the best possible outcomes that they can achieve. The standards promote inclusive practices, ensuring that all children regardless of their abilities or backgrounds have access to quality childcare. This focus on inclusivity supports the development of diverse and equitable early years environments. However there could be more support and guidance on engaging with and meeting the needs of diverse communities. By being more specific, support and resources could be offered to address diversity to make the standards more inclusive.

It provides practical advice on creating inclusive environments, identifying and supporting children with additional needs, and working with families and other professionals to ensure all children have the equal opportunities to succeed and encourage their holistic development. It provides the guidance for the inclusive leader to ensure that the early years settings value diversity, ensure equity and support the individual needs of every child as every child is a unique child.

Standard 4 is Inclusion, equality and diversity in the childcare setting. It states that children are not discriminated against as set out in the Equality Act 2010. This includes culture, language, additional learning needs, special educational needs and academic and sporting abilities. The NMS uses words firmly and positively as in what is expected rather than stating it should be expected. This gives no room for practitioners to not follow them. The Standards have to be followed to a minimum of what is stated but in order to receive a higher outcome during Inspections by Care Inspectorate Wales, the settings have to exceed these expectations and continually be striving to improve (Welsh Government, 2023a). Each childcare setting has to have an equal opportunities policy and the outcome of this standard is that all children are treated with equal concern and respect. The policy has to be reviewed regularly and updated when necessary and shared with parents. It is the role of the inclusive leader to ensure that this is done. Furthermore, it is the role of the inclusive leader to ensure that 'all children and adults are treated with equal concern' and the registered person ensures that the training of practitioners, day to day care, activities and the environment and employing suitable staff are all done within the guidelines of the equal opportunities policy. Within the equal opportunities Standard 16, there are different examples of good practice and anti-discriminatory legislation and these include Equality Act 2010, (Welsh Government, 2010) Anti-racist Wales Action Plan, (Welsh Government, 2022b) Action on disability: the right to independent living framework and action plan, (Welsh Government, 2019) and LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales. (Welsh Government, 2023b) Providing the NMS are followed to a minimum standards are met and anything more than that will improve the service offered. A Curriculum for non-maintained nursery settings is Welsh Government guidance. (Welsh Government, 2022) The guidance states that the environment should in order to be accessible by all be well organised. However this makes it sound optional as it says it should whereas if it said must practitioners would have to adhere to it, hence making the environment accessible and inclusive. It also states it 'should' include diverse and authentic representation such as religion, sexual orientation, gender and ability and 'should' make adaptations to remove barriers to participation aswell as it 'should' provide resources that are open-ended to reflect diversity and are not gender-specific. All of these should be a must not a should to ensure they happen and that they are not an option. These need to be reflected upon and checked for effectiveness and that these strategies are actually happening not merely should be

happening, Continual reflection ensures that the best possible environment is in place for the children offering them the best opportunities to reach their potential.

Section 3

Inclusive leadership is very important to me. I am a manager at an early years setting and I have inclusivity as a priority throughout every session with each and every child. I very much believe in the concept that every child matters and this is paramount to the planning for inclusivity in the setting. I show the importance of inclusive practice through showing by example and the way I treat others.

Firstly I always remember that every child is a unique child. Before the child starts at the setting I speak to the parents and show them around the setting. I discuss any needs to identify any barriers whether it be additional learning needs (ALN), physical, social, cultural or attitudinal barriers.

In our setting we have the advantage of the use of an Early Help Hub so any families that may feel isolated or feel they need to talk with someone are able to access this. We also offer workshops and welcome families to these at the setting. They are to show the families how the children have their snacks and prepare them themselves so parents can encourage them at home. It enables parents to talk to each other and breaks down any barriers.

All activities and resources are available for each and every child to use and when we purchase resources we ensure that inclusive practice is at the forefront. Children are positively challenged to achieve their aims and milestones.

We have areas of dressing up and we have different cultures within that. I do not believe in highlighting the costumes but have them in there as the norm and this goes for having dolls in wheelchairs as well as dolls in prams too. I feel we should treat everyone the same and not draw attention that another child is different as we are all unique so no child is more different to the next. The children have circle time and we discuss different cultures, same sex families and disabilities to name just a few as we have children in our setting belonging to these. When our same sex family started we bought books such as 'My mums love me' and 'Two Dads' and we read these to the children that were already in the setting and discussed with them before the family started with us. When children have asked why the children have two dads we address the question as we would any other and say it is like another child with two mums and also like another with a mum and a dad. All families are different as some have a brother or a sister or both so all families are special and unique.

Staff that are stereotyping children and families are spoken to immediately if anything is said out of line as it is not acceptable in our setting. However this is rare

as staff all have training and it is part of their continuous professional development (CPD) to be updating and staying current with inclusive practice. Staff are all trained or currently receiving training in Makaton, Sign language and PECS. We have monthly one to ones and annual appraisals and inclusive practice is discussed during these too as well as having regular strategy meetings.

We also take advice from other professionals and therapists and deliver what we have learned in our sessions and when a child needs it.

At the end of the day we strive to ensure inclusive practice is delivered throughout every session to every child, every day without exception and ensure all children can participate in the safe, nurturing, stimulating environment where all activities and resources are accessible and enjoyable.

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