

1.

As according to the Cambridge Dictionary (no date) a catalyst is defined as an event or a person who causes or speeds up change. Therefore, a catalytic leader is someone who inspires change (Working Differently, 2013). Parker (2020) defines catalytic leadership as a concrete set of communication practices which lead to social justice and change. Being a catalytic leader doesn't mean just achieving success through hierarchy and dictation but instead stripping down to basics and changing elements that are not working from the ground upwards (Joiner, 2017).

Whereas, Murray and Clark (2013) frame catalytic leadership in the early years as founded on passionate care to improve well-being of children forming into change and greater outcomes. Clark (2012) highlights that traditional views of leadership are challenged by the concept of catalytic leadership as Early Years practitioners show how their inspiration for change is not dependent on power. Sakr and O'Sullivan (2020) further this by stating that early years practitioners need to think of themselves as leaders of change, not in a power sense, but instead in a sense of passion, social change and optimism. Cooper (2014) discusses how practitioners tend to avoid topics such as leadership due to the misconceptions of what it means to be a leader. Cooper (2014) and Daniel (2018) both agree that leadership should be catalysts to change by being collaborative of all practitioners and children's needs instead of just authority.

On the other hand, Douglass (2019) suggests that traditional leadership is one of the single most important factors of performance and quality improvement in work and life settings. However, Fenlon (2019) disagrees here and details that an early years practitioners positive presence in a setting is more considered to influence change than authority. McDowall Clark (2012) furthers this and highlights that practitioners have responsibility to be leaders in practice by inspiring other practitioners to participate in quality improvement. Contrasting this, Henshall *et al* (2018) states that practitioners inspiration is often taken away by stress of staffing and lack of training therefore hindering catalytic leadership opportunities.

Talan, Bloom and Kelton (2014) highlight that many leaders within childcare do not set out to be leaders but were identified and set the role due to being good practitioners. McDowall Clark (2012) furthers this and details that the learning journey of practitioners when making that change to catalytic leadership is crucial in creating dynamic learning communities for lifelong learning. Furthermore, Northouse (2016) agrees here and highlights that shifting to a leadership mindset means that practitioners should use not only their knowledge on child development and morals but also their personal traits and skills. On the other hand, Grantham Caston and Fontcuberta DiCarlo (2021) advocate that it is essential to have authoritative leaders who possess skills and traits of an effective leader set in place in settings.

It is stated by Waniganayake (2014) that when practitioners are making the decision to work in the early years they also make the decision to become a leader as they are looked upon as a role model who

implements the change for children in their setting. This links to the new Curriculum for Wales as the Welsh Government (2022f) aim for practitioners to feel empowered to make changes by designing their own curriculum based on the needs of their learners. Furthermore, the Welsh Government (2016) insist that an effective curriculum is based on a strong foundation of inspired practitioners with collaboration and good practice at heart. It is known to early years practitioners that a part of providing high quality education and care comes from the understanding the new curriculum and how it should be implemented (Early Years Wales, 2020). However, O'Prey *et al* (2019) suggests that the new curriculum for Wales has confused practitioners as the lack of training involved has left many unanswered questions about designing a curriculum.

There are many sociological factors that affect a child's life (WJEC, 2019b). During the early years of child's life they are continually absorbing their surroundings whether this may be a positive or negative influence (My First Five Years, no date). There are environmental factors that effect the development of a child such as lack of care within a child care setting or lack of resources or support in the community (Centre for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation, no date). Education Summary (2023) also suggests that experiences, learning opportunities and participation in activities are all factors in the development of a child as it increases their social awareness and encourages children to feel supported and confident. This is furthered by McCartney (2015) who state that the higher the quality of childcare the greater the development of the child. However, Welsh Government (2022a) argue that the conditions of childcare settings is being impacted by the cost of the living crisis however provision by practitioners should remain high quality to achieve these positives for child development. In spite of this, Wales Trade Union Congress (2022) state that practitioners cannot give high quality childcare due to the poor-quality conditions, underfunding and poor pay.

Majumdar and Mukand (no date) suggest that catalytic leadership is important in the development of the child as it acts as a catalyst of change for children who may be experiencing negative effects from their family or the wider community. Ryan (2022) furthers this and details that practitioners have the power to remove barriers for children and families who are struggling to overcome challenges at home or in the settings.

There may be a number of difficulties in the early years when beginning to partake in catalytic leadership. Kraft and Papay (2014) put forward the notion that catalytic leadership can only thrive in supportive and consistent environments, one of the clear supports in an early years setting is the staff relationships. These key strong relationship between staff in an early years setting ensure a strong emotional environment where children feel safe and cared for (Buckingham Council, no date). However, Lawler (2021) argue that this cannot always be achieved as more than 8 in 10 early years providers are finding it difficult to recruit and retain staff. Jackson (2022) supports this by detailing that

the stress of staff shortages takes its toll on remaining staff who cannot form these strong bonds and relationships due to increasing expectations and challenged within the settings. To counteract and attempt to retain staff in the early years it is proposed by Wallace and Cooper (2020) that staff should have access to more training opportunities for career progression and wage increase. However, the Early Years Alliance (2022) details that there is an extreme lack of funding for the crucial training for early years staff making it even more difficult for settings to retain their staff who want to progress.

The Early Childhood Care and Education Workforce (2011) imply that negative attitudes of practitioners correlates with lack of empowerment for change in settings. Catalytic leadership is a cohesive force of leadership and teamwork that raises performance of everyone involved not just the leader (Tommer *et al*, 2018). McCormick Center (2018) furthers this and suggests that practitioners feel intimidated and often judges by people in power in their settings and instead suggest that supervisors should work with staff to change instead of dictating change through power. However, Social Care Wales (2022) puts across a different view that states that the way to increase staff morale and remove negative attitudes is down to increased supervision by putting people in power at settings to do staff appraisals and to check in regularly on staff. Furthermore, removing barriers to create a can-do positive attitude sources from training to provide practitioners with the knowledge and experience to feel confident and empowered to create change in settings (WJEC, 2019a). On the other hand, Stokes (2016) details that a multi-agency approach is the only way in which barriers can be removed for children and that practitioners in a setting alone are not enough to be agents for change for the child.

2.

In 2001 the first Children's Commissioner for Wales was appointed under the Care Standards Act 2000 (Business Senedd Wales, 2013). Peter Clarke was the first Children's Commissioner for Wales who began his post in 2001 until Keith Towler took over in 2008 until 2015 (Children's Rights Wales, no date). The third Commission for Wales was Sally Holland who began her post aiming to engage with thousands of children, young people, parents and professionals to discuss the most pressing issues facing children at the time (Education Workforce Council, no date). However, Butler *et al* (2021) argue here that not all voices are heard in reports done by Children's Commissioners and people in power as families are intimidated or often scared to say the wrong things.

Rocio Cifuentes is the current Children's Commissioner for Wales, she began her seven year post in April of 2022 (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023). The role of the commissioner promoted and protects children's rights and ensures that all legislations and policies have the child's best interest at heart at all times (Welsh Government, 2022d). Rocio Cifuentes uses her position to work for children and young people in Wales under 18 years of age, or 25 years old if they have been through the care system (Citizen Advice, 2023).

Children's Commissioner for Wales (2023) states that the role of the commissioner is to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of the children, the role works in line with the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (as cited by UNICEF, no date) which sets out the minimum standards for children and young people. As according to Carmarthenshire Youth Council (2023) state that Rocio Cifuentes details a clear passion for the wellbeing of children and strives to create the best possible start in life for all children and young people. However, statistics show that numbers of cruelty towards children or young people offences recorded in England and Wales are increasing from 22,158 in 2019/20 to 24,875 in 2020/21 and then to 29,921 in 2021/22 (Statista, 2022). NSPCC (2022) take this further and detail how the most concerning this is that often child abuse or neglect is going unreported and often unnoticed and that actually half a million children a year suffer abuse in the UK.

This section will now focus of a report made by Sally Holland. Building Blocks is report made by Sally Holland, the previous Children's Commissioner for Wales. Building Blocks focusses on inclusion in the foundation phase, during the report 21 cases were analysed over an 18 month period which showed common themes in cases that involved children being excluded or isolated in the Foundation Phase (Children's Commissioner for Wales, no date). A report, discussing findings by the Children's Commissioner for Wales was published as well as a toolkit to help early years practitioners when supporting children in the Foundation Phase (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021a). In the Building Blocks report (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021b) the commissioner highlights gaps in support for children in school which, in some cases, had led to the child no longer attending school

which consequently led to lack of further support of pathways for referrals and assessments when needed.

In the report Sally Holland puts forward recommendations to help and achieve inclusion for all children. One of these is for school leaders. The Children's Commissioner for Wales (2021b) recommends that head teachers should ensure that they have established communication mechanisms with local early years settings in order to ensure a smooth and successful transition for children by transfer of important information. As according to O'Connor (2017) transitions in education and care in the early years are a key part of healthy development and well-being and can help achieve a foundation for future learning. Queensland Government (2022) furthers this and agrees that positive transitions have long lasting benefits but also state that it is not just about a first day but instead it's a process that happens over time. However, UCL Institute of Health Equity (no date) state that transitions are not always as smooth as they should be to benefit the child, the negative transitions can have a negative impact on pupils' social, emotional and academic outcomes.

Oxfordshire County Council (2017) state that smooth transitions within the early years are dependent on commitment from practitioners and professionals to make strong effective communication links between settings as well as families. Birth to 5 Matters (no date) also put forward the notion that a transition takes time and is a process rather than an event, it also recognises that a successful transition included the recognition of the importance of a child feeling known as this helps children feel as though practitioners know and can meet their needs. During a transition it is practitioners role to help children feel safe and cared for as they may feel confused, overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted by the process (Mincemoyer, 2016). Nottingham City Council (no date) state that transitions are eased by careful proactive planning and sharing of information between agencies and families.

Lester (2019) states that for effective communication to be in place there is an essential need for committed practitioners who know and understand the children well. However, these communication links are becoming harder as according to Learner (2021), as she states that exhausted nursery staff are leaving the role leaving less committed staff to know these children leaving them unsupported in their transitions.

Strong communication links are key for transitions, however, it is detailed that those children who do not attend nursery and are potentially living in poverty are left unsupported through transitions due to lack of connections such as previous key workers (Reynolds *et al*, 2019). Marshall (2019) furthers this and suggests that children who live in low income households often do not attend a nursery setting and stay home with parents, this limits relationship ties and can cause the child to struggle to trust others and form bonds easily. This struggle with relationships causes challenges with transition and challenges in development as well as educational attainment (Lyndon, 2019). On the other hand, Hobbs and Mutebi (2021) put forward the notion that a child is capable of overcoming the impacts of poverty through positive early years experiences through inspiring professionals and education.

Another recommendation that the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2018) made was that the Local Authorities need to endure of suitable and reliable mechanism for schools to regularly inform them of children who may be at risk of exclusion, exclusions that have already been issued, children who are regularly in isolation and finally the age and information of children who are affected.

As according to Mentally Healthy School (no date) children who have been excluded from school are at a higher risk of mental health difficulties, difficulties making friends and behavioural issues. This is furthered by Education Policy Institute (2017) who state that children who are excluded from the education system are also at heightened risks of unemployment and criminal offending. Ofsted (2009) found that often children in the early years have been excluded from school and early years settings due to the lack of support to practitioners for complex behavioural issues. Childrens Legal Centre (2016) emphasises the importance for the introduction of an official track of how many children in the early years were being excluded, they disclosed from April 2014 to December 2015 they received 115 calls regarding children under 7 being excluded from school, 92 of these were suspected or diagnosed with additional learning needs. Furthermore, Snap Cymru (no date) details that exclusion is justified when serious or persistent breaches of school policy are made or if allowing the pupil to remain in school may cause serious harm to others in the setting. However, there are many alternative routes to exclusion for children in the early years (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023). Early Years Careers (2016) suggests that practitioners should use behaviour techniques to attempt to support the child in dealing with emotions they may be struggling with, such as using emotion cards to identify or using physical activity to reduce stress.

Children who face the challenge of being excluded from school leaves them at risk of being unseen by local authorities (Akinsulire, 2022). Children's behaviour may be suffering when situations at home are hard to deal with, early years children are not always equipped to deal with their emotions and therefore can be confronted in behavioural issues such as biting or aggression (Better Health, 2021). Purfett (2018) focuses on the implications of excluding children who are already vulnerable, by excluding these children it is furthering their potential harm.

In regards to implementing the communication between local authorities and schools about how many children are excluded, it does not stop exclusion happening within schools. As according to World Economic Forum (2018) exclusion from school also means being excluded from learning within schools, for example, often staff members in settings are not equipped to support children with disabilities therefore they are excluded from high quality learning (Skipp and Hopwood, 2019). In 2018 only 18% of local authorities reported that they had enough provision for ALN children in the early years (Coram, 2020). This lack of provision can be pinned to attitudes of teachers (Lee *et al*, 2015). Lee *et al* (2015) found that teachers who have training in additional learning needs tend to be more favourable in the inclusion of the children whereas teachers who do not have the training attitudes vary. This makes it clear how important the training and continuous professional development

opportunities for practitioners are when working with children with ALN to ensure more support in inclusion and development of the child (Pacey, no date). However, Drayton and Farquharson (2022) further critique this and suggest that school funding is limited and has to be spread thoughtfully so often training about topics such as additional learning needs is put at the end of the list.

To conclude, although the formal statistics and report of early years children who are excluded from school is important in ensuring no children go under the radar and are put in further harm Purfett (2018), it is clear that these are not the only children who are excluded from education (World Economic Forum, 2018).

3.

The sociological factors surrounding the lives of children effect how they grow, develop and the opportunities they have later in life (Leonard, 2016). Child poverty can be defined as when a child is raised with limited or no access to the essentials they need to survive and live a high quality life such as food, sanitation and education (World Vision, no date). According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023) in 2020/21 3.9 million children in the United Kingdom live in poverty, which equates to 1 in 4 children. Likewise, Action for Children (2020) states that in Wales 34% of children in 2020 lived in poverty due to costing of housing such as rent, water sales increasing for their parents or carers. Health Scotland (2023) highlights these children that are born and are living in poverty are at greater risk of disadvantage as their exposure to poorer education, stress of living and unhealthy lifestyles is increased due to limited money for a good quality of living.

Flying start is an Early Years programme for families with children under 4 years old who live in disadvantaged areas in Wales who aim to mitigate impacts of poverty on children (Welsh Government, 2017). Flying start is funded by the Welsh Government to provide a range of support services such as health visiting support, free part-time childcare, parenting support programmes and early language development and play skills (NHS Wales, no date). As according to the Welsh Government (2022b) flying start aims to increase the provisions and skills available to family and children in deprivation therefore enhancing their start in early life. Bath and North East Somerset Local Safeguarding Children Board (2017) supports this and suggests that the effective care of children in the early years is dependant on the strong partnerships in a multi-agent approach. This is furthered by Natalie Macdonald (no date) as they suggest that a multi-agency approach used within flying start settings provides families with education opportunities to greatly reduce the barriers created by poverty for the child. However, Scott and Resseguier (2022) state that effective partnerships and multi-agency working requires time and commitment to establish which can sometimes be hard to come by due to the fast pace of the early years.

Welsh Government (2022b) puts forward that from April 2021 to March 2022 just over 34,000 children received Flying Start services, including more visits with health visitors and part-time care. Flying start offers an inclusive service to facilitate the developmental needs of every individual child in their care (Flying Start Cardiff, no date). However, Senedd Research (2018) put forward the need for flying start to identify children living outside flying start areas who's families may also need support and benefit from the programme. This viewpoint is supported by Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2020) as they state that 45% of children living in poverty are not eligible for Flying Start, therefore flying start is failing in reducing the barrier for the children in poverty as a large proportion is being overlooked (Save the Children, no date). As according to National Education Union (2021) children who live in poverty that do not receive this help from organisations such as Flying Start often lead to poor educational attainment

as they demonstrate fatigue, poor concentration, hunger and ill health during their school hours. Welsh Government (2022e) recognise this inequality in the approach of flying start and offered an expansion which began in September 2022 offering the service to an additional 2,500 children ages 0-4.

Another strategy to help children in poverty is free school meals. Free school meals is a legislation that gives free school meals to children who attend a maintained school in Wales (Welsh Government, 2022c). To be able to claim these free school meals a parent or guardian has to earn a net income of £7,400 or less (Welsh Government, 2019). Providing children with free school meals enables children to have the same opportunities to learn and eat healthily and well no matter if they are living in deprivation or not (Impact on Urban Health, 2022). The Food Foundation (2022) highlights the benefits of free school meals by stating that children who eat healthy meals have lower obesity rates, better academic performance and improved lifetime productivity. Furthermore, although Llie, Sutherland and Vignoles (2017) recognise the benefits of free school meals in its attempt to close the socio-economic gap they put forward the argument that free school meals do not recognise every child who lives in deprivation. This argument is supported by Child Poverty Action Group (2022) who state that the main causes of parents or caregivers not being eligible for free school meals for their child or children is restrictive eligibility criteria and lack of universal provision. Welsh Government (2022c) recognise this gap in the scheme and from September 2022 offered universal free school meals for all children in reception, and intends that all primary school children will get free school meals in Wales by 2024.

The final early intervention discussed in this portfolio to provide support to children and families who may be living in poverty is the childcare offer for Wales. This Childcare Offer for Wales is a scheme that offers help with childcare costs for 3-4 year olds, parents can claim up to 30 hours of early education and childcare a week for up to 48 weeks of the year (Welsh Government, no date). To be eligible for this offer the parent or guardian must be working or in education and earning minimum wage for at least 16 hours per week, in education or training or earn less than £100,000 per year per parent (Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, no date).

The Childcare Offer helps eligible parents to return to work, increase their hours, increase flexibility in work or go back into education (Cardiff Council, 2023). Glover *et al* (2018) further this and detail that the offer intends for parents to have more employment choices whilst also having increased disposable income. Welsh Parliament (no date) supports this and states that 84% of parents who engage in the childcare offer report they now have more disposable income and 56% report increased opportunities to increase their income. However, Oxfam Cymru (2020) proposes an argument against the childcare offer and questions if the offer is really committed to breaking barriers for children and families in poverty when it is not reaching all as the child must be 3-4 years old when the offer becomes available.

Welsh Parliament (no date) supports this and states that the Childcare Offer has not been successful in encouraging employment as parents are still waiting 3 years for their child to be eligible and therefore unable to work in this time, they state that only 2% of parents who claim the offer were not working beforehand.

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