

Catalytic leadership, rights, resilience, and social change.

Part 1

The definition of a catalyst is someone or something that creates radical change through a happening or event. To be a catalytic leader is to be passionate about a cause, striving for positive change, one who uses their influence to improve the lives of others, in turn, encouraging individuals to develop a sense of empowerment through the aim of a common goal for the greater good (Lomenick, 2013; Luke and Luke, 1997). Inspirational leaders are the catalyst who achieve innovation in the environment by encouraging and inspiring others through ambitious and dynamic desires to create constant successful innovation improving lives of others and the world through the process (Lomenick, 2013; Agbor, 2008). When considering catalytic leadership in an early year's education it can be said that leadership is central to the motivation and influence on others through shared effective objectives and goals providing quality provision in the early years (Gumus *et al.* 2018).

The early years is a crucial time for child development and practitioners as effective catalytic leaders are in a unique position to influence all involved in care, wellbeing, and education of all children through passionate commitment whilst contributing to positive change in the lives of all learners (Kivunja, 2015; Hadfield, 2015; Clark and Murray, 2012; Bush, 2012). Clark and Murray (2012) suggest leadership is the responsibility of all early year's practitioners (EYP) as a strong team of influencers however, there is often a misconception that leadership lies with those in positions of management with authority and power (Clark and Murray, 2012; Fitzgerald and Gunter, 2008). Similarly, Lindon, Lindon, and Beckley (2016) propose leadership is not suited to all practitioners, the suggestion here is regardless of enthusiasm, there is a need for some innovative decisions to be made by more senior members of the organisation as many practitioners struggle with the concept of being leaders and view leadership as being a managerial task (Clark, 2012; Siraj and Manni, 2007). In contrast to this viewpoint, the Children's Workforce Development Council (2010) believes all practitioners are central to implementing catalytic change and raising standards in early years settings by working skilfully and collaborative through collaborative leadership (Lindon,

Lindon, and Beckley, 2016) in turn making worthwhile contributions to the well-being and development of all learners and achieving common goals. (Lindon, Lindon, and Beckley, 2016; Siraj and Hallet, 2016; Lindon and Lindon, 2011).

As effective leadership is key to successful implementation in the early year's environment (Clark, 2012; Siraj and Manni, 2007) it is important to consider the interpersonal skills of a catalytic leader. Emotional intelligence is said to be an essential trait of catalytic leaders, this supports self-awareness, self-reflection, and personal development, enabling articulation and interpretation of thought and feelings of oneself and others effectively (Chopra and Kanji, 2010; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020). In the early year's environment, emotional intelligence of practitioners enables formation of positive relationships with learners and families, this enables a trust and respect to develop which is essential when promoting catalytic change. (Bates, 2016).

Donald Schon's theory on reflective practice suggests two useful methods. One being evaluation after the event which enables insightful critical analysis of everyday practice which allows for effective planning to improve on practice. The next method is the ability to reflect while working and make changes accordingly in the moment and manage unexpected sometimes difficult occurrences. This method allows practitioners to listen to experiences and responses from individuals and reflect on the effectiveness of changes made (Bates, 2017; Aubrey and Riley, 2022). In practice, reflectiveness being vital for catalytic leadership allows practitioners to develop critical thinking skills and assess the learning environment, provision, and make changes to improve on practice to achieve success for all learners (Brock, 2015; Miller and Cable, 2011).

Leaders should be adaptable, positive role models and mentors, forming positive relationships with team members, learners and families, inspiring others to increase knowledge and skills, forming an ability, understanding and adaptability to consider the varying needs of learners, their families, and circumstances (Lanka, Topkas, and Patterson, 2020; Rodger, 2016; O'Sullivan, 2009). However, Lindon, Lindon, and Beckley (2016) point out leaders being viewed as nice can be a barrier to successful leadership as there are times when opinions differ, and difficult decisions have to be made. Tony Bush and David Middlewood (Cited in Bates, 2016) argue that the learning experiences of children is at the centre of all practitioners aim, staff must feel valued and feel they are reaching their full

potential, this is where a good level of emotional intelligence is important in catalytic leaders as they are more equipped to manage difficult situations and achieve positive results (Chopra and Kanji, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner believed factors in the environment in which a child grows has a significant influence on development (Bates, 2016), his theory of ecological systems places the child at the centre of several factors which has a direct impact, for example immediate family and friends, schools, healthcare, extended family, access to services, culture, community, and economic situation (Aubrey and Riley, 2022; Bates, 2016). Similarly, negative socioeconomic factors are defined as social influences that occur in the home environment, for instance, parental income, poverty, behaviours and level of education, community issues such as anti-social behaviour, safety, access to green spaces, cultural aspects, and deprivation. (Ryff and Krueger, 2018; Merry, Condrón and Torres, 2020; Siraj and Mayo, 2014).

Studies have shown socioeconomic factors have a detrimental effect on early child health, development, and serious consequences for attainment in education. Letourneau, *et al.* (2013) analysis of socioeconomic status suggests it is commonly linked with detrimental effects on healthy development and wellbeing of children. Not only does it affect income but level of education, aspiration, social status, and quality of life, moreover, detrimental effects on physical and mental health caused by multiple experiences of stressors during early years (Barnhart, Garcia and Karcher, 2022). However, Doherty and Hughes (2014) counteract Bronfenbrenner's theory and argue that positive connections and interactions with a varied range of people in the environment can prove advantageous and change outcomes for the better. Tudge, *et al.* (2009) suggest Bronfenbrenner himself submitted to the fact his earlier theory did not consider how a person participates in their own development guided by varying influences. Therefore, passionate practitioners in everyday practice demonstrating powerful influences, interactions and early years experiences are vital to change negative socioeconomic impacts in children's lives (Clark, 2012; Siraj and Manni, 2007).

Catalytic leadership in the early years is defined as practitioners coming together inspiring others to improve provision aiming for quality outcomes for all learners (Siraj and Hallet, 2016). However, practitioners face a myriad of barriers when it comes to leadership including decision making, perceptions, communication, and conflict (O'Sullivan, 2009).

The concept of change can present challenges to leaders. This can be due to an unwillingness for change and embark on new projects or objectives (Gasper, 2010; Rodger 2016).

Reluctance can lead to difficulties in making decisions which produces lacklustre outcomes or no implementation at all (O'Sullivan, 2009). Harris *et al.* (2021) review on leadership in Wales discusses educational settings currently being in the process of change and implementing the new curriculum, the findings include, leadership roles are central in accomplishing change and supporting successful transition, furthermore, leadership is vital for the ongoing changes as the Welsh Government continue to improve education in Wales. To ensure successful transition for change it is essential practitioners view leadership as a collaborative relationship in the early years environment where the team collectively engage and share knowledge, empowering others, embracing change together during the process (Siraj and Hallet, 2014; Gasper, 2010).

An article by Lyndon (2022) suggests that even though the role of early years practitioners is seen as central to lessening the effects of poverty for children and their family, practitioners often find themselves experiencing financial difficulties due to low pay, furthermore, the pay often does not reflect the leadership roles and responsibilities practitioners now take on board resulting in practitioners feeling undervalued, overworked and underpaid (Nicholson, *et al.* 2020; Lyndon, 2022; Lloyd and Hallet, 2010). Brown and Devecchi (2013) state that even though training improves knowledge and understanding, enhances provision for learners, and has a positive impact on practitioners' sense of accomplishment it has very little impact for career progression or pay. The Welsh Government (2016) is committed to raising standards in the early years workforce by providing training opportunities and recognised qualifications such as level three and degree's, however, there appears to be no mention of increase in pay and this may impede on the Welsh Government's initiatives for raising quality in the early year's workforce (Lloyd and Hallet, 2010; Welsh Government, 2016).

A reluctance in practitioners to lead can also stem from the view that teaching staff or senior management are the true leaders, however, Clark (2012) states that being inspirational and a catalyst for change is not reliant on what is viewed as more senior staff and practitioners are perfectly placed for building positive relationships.

To conclude, this assignment shows early years practitioners are pivotal figures in leading catalytic change in the lives of learners and their families. Practitioners are perfectly placed in forming positive home school relationships and recognising where support is needed. Early

years settings who have a united workforce working through shared thinking, and collaboration with the aim to provide quality provision and achieve success for all learners.

Part 2

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international legally binding agreement which recognises and protects the rights of children across the world, (Murray, Swadener and Smith, 2020; Eriksen, Eriksen and Backe-Hansen, 2018; Alderson, 2008). A total of 196 countries have signed up to the UNCRC and are duty bound to establish implementation (Save the Children, no date) however, according to the Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights (2023) it is only when a country takes appropriate steps to apply the UNCRC into law, policies and practice, children's rights will be protected. The Welsh Government is committed to fostering children's rights and in 2011 introduced the Rights of Children and Young Person's (Wales) Measure 2011, this important legislation means that children's rights are embedded into Welsh law and ministers are duty bound to comply with UNCRC (Welsh Government, 2021a; Rees, 2012; Murphy and Waters-Davies, 2022).

The Children's Commissioner for Wales advocates as an independent human rights organisation which is funded by the Welsh Government, each Commissioner role lasts for 7 years. The current and fourth Children's Commissioner for Wales Rocio Cifuentes was appointed in 2022, which actively involved children and young people in the interview process (Welsh Government, 2022a). The Commissioner operates independently of Welsh Ministers, enabling the application of lawful duties which includes scrutiny of the Welsh Government. The Commissioner champion's the voice of children and young people and advocates for the protection and promotion children's rights to be implemented throughout Wales (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2023). However Rees (2012) highlights issues which may cause difficulties for the Commissioner when intervening in a particular service on behalf of a child for example, the Commissioner cannot force officials and Ministers to rectify or improve a situation, changes cannot be made where it is not part of a devolved area, for example, youth justice, benefits, asylum and immigration, nonetheless, however, Rees further suggests out of the four nations of the United Kingdom, Wales have been more proactive when considering the UNCRC in promoting and implementing children's rights into law throughout Wales, raising awareness to children and young people of their rights, banning physical punishment of children, including children in decision making which affect them (Rees, 2012; Rees, 2010; Welsh Government, no date; From Chile to Cymru, 2022).

The United Kingdom's first Commissioner Peter Clarke was appointed 2001 following the Waterhouse enquiry regarding significant historic abuse which took place at children's homes in North Wales (Hillman, *et al.* 2010). The catalyst for change stemming from the reports first recommendation, Wales should designate a Children's Commissioner responsible for establishing the rights for children in Wales and are respected by way of monitoring complaints, whistleblowing and implementing support and services for children's voices to be heard (Department of Health, 2002, p. 808; Rees, 2012; Hillman, *et al.* 2010).).

Responsibilities of the new commissioner under the legislation were restricted to children and young people in care (Care Standards Act, 2000; Hillman, *et al.* 2010; Rees, 2012) however, the campaign by the people of Wales for the Commissioner to advocate for the rights, welfare and safeguarding for all children in Wales had continued which resulted in the Children's Commissioner for Wales Act 2001 to include every child and young person and all issues which affect them (Children's Commissioner for Wales Act, 2001; Hillman, 2010; Rees, 2012).

Sally Holland Children's Commissioner for Wales in 2015 until 2022, during this time she worked tirelessly to improve the wellbeing and mental health of children and young people including bullying, disabilities, social emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) and additional learning needs. In 2018 she released her publication Building Blocks, Inclusion in the Foundation Phase. The report focused on an investigation into several cases of exclusion and isolation in the Foundation Phase (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018). In fact, several parents approached the Commissioners team with concerns regarding their children not accessing any form of education due to disputes with local authorities and schools regarding placement of their children. The report analysed 768 incidents of fixed term exclusions, children receiving more than one during the school year, unofficial exclusion by collecting child during the school day, reduced timetables, and taught in isolation away from peers 2018-19, data provided is not thought to show a true reflection of actual figures as not all local authorities provided information required. Exclusion and isolation in school has negative consequences for the wellbeing of children including academic failure, negative impact on emotional wellbeing, leading to unemployment and criminal behaviours in adulthood (Power and Taylor, 2011; Pirrie *et al.* 2011; Daniels, 2011).

One recommendation from the report is for training opportunities for all foundation phase support staff in supporting children with SEBD and embed an impetus for a holistic approach (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018; Children's Commissioner for Wales, no date). The Welsh Government (2021b) is committed to embedding holistic approach to inclusion, therefore as pupils with additional learning needs are increasingly being taught in mainstream settings (Smith and Tyler 2011) professional development is vital to ensure practitioners have understanding on how to interact with pupils with SEBD (Hallworth, 2022) and understand how pupils are perceived and responded to has a big impact on their behaviour (Hallworth, 2022; Smith and Tyler, 2011; Michail, 2011).

Interestingly an article by Knight *et al.* (2022) suggests practitioners view lack of funding for specific training and resources from local authorities as a colossal impediment to the inclusion of pupils with additional learning needs. According to Dauncey (2019) there is simply not enough money available to schools from Local Authorities making it immensely difficult to operate effectively (National Assembly for Wales Children, Young People and Education Committee 2019)) However, Saloviita, (2020) argues the issues will not be resolved by extra funding and manpower alone, the onus is on practitioners perception towards inclusion need to change and passionate practitioners are the catalyst for learner inclusion (Carlson *et al.* 2012; Tiernan, Casserly, and Maguire, 2020; Saloviita, 2020).

Hallworth (2022) argues difficulties arise when addressing the issue of problematic behaviour due to practitioners interpretation of behaviours and categorizing challenging pupils as uncontrollable, contrary to this view, challenging behaviour must be seen as a way of communication of needs not being met, training is vital for practitioners to understand how pupils are perceived and responded to has a big impact on their behaviour (Ellis and Todd, 2018; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018) furthermore the impact of social and emotional issues negatively affect engagement in the classroom (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018; Hallworth, 2022) practitioners must view all learners as worthy and capable of achievement (Knight *et al.*, 2022).. When healthy positive relationships are established, pupils develop a sense of belonging and aspirations grow which paves the way for inclusivity in the classroom considering individual needs and occurrences in their life (Knight, *et al.* 2022; Serin, 2017).

In addition to this, recommendations for early intervention and specific Foundation Phase action plans are put in place without the need for exclusion to support learners with SEBD (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018). Parish (2013) argues that supporting learners with challenging behaviour thus far is execrable and highlights the concept of early intervention as a predominant factor for making positive changes in supporting children. Early years intervention offers a window of time to achieve favourable circumstances, altering the path of children's development (Dunlap and Fox, 2011).

Parent and toddler groups are positioned in communities to provide basic level early support with a facilitator for parents and augment through highlighting positive parenting, social connections, and signposting to relevant services (Williams, *et al.* 2018). Furthermore, when engaging in parent toddler groups parents experienced improved emotional wellbeing and developed confidence in parenting their young child, parents felt the groups offered useful information for parents and social network support and attending also supported their child's development (Owen and Anderson, 2017). However, Williams *et al.* (2018) states even though parent and toddler groups were favoured by parents and stakeholders, there is little evidence of effectiveness for positive changes in child development and positive impact on parent behaviour and at-risk families and more study is needed. A study by Owen and Anderson (2018) found that many parents who attended playgroups were doing so due to the informal support they received and the relationships which are developed within the community-based groups. Playgroups as an early year's intervention has the potential to make positive changes for long term outcomes for children who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, however more research is needed to determine the impact for later outcomes (McLean, Edwards and Mantilla, 2020).

To conclude, this assignment shows early intervention has a positive impact for children's social, emotional, and behavioural development. Enabling children to interact with peers in a warm, safe, and welcoming environment with caring, enabling practitioners gives them the best start in life. Building positive relationships with children and their parents forms the foundations for a trusting relationship where parents and practitioners work together with the child at the centre of everything. Allowing these experiences enables children to grow confidence and explore freely as they interact with peers and combat new challenges. The relationships between families and practitioners are vital in supporting children experiencing

SEBD, and when working together with a shared vision with passionate practitioners' positive changes can be made for inclusivity for all.

Part 3

Sociological factors have consequential impact on the development of children during the early years (Atashbahar, *et al.* 2022) leading to social exclusion through disadvantage which shapes lives in the future (Pierson, 2016). Sociological factors include deprivation, abuse, neglect, bullying, unemployment (Miller and Hevey, 2016; Atashbahar, 2022; UNICEF, no date a).

Across the world there are said to be an estimated 356 million children who live in poverty resulting in death, disease, negative impact on child development and poor outcomes later in life, moreover, children growing up in deprivation experience lack of basic necessities, for example, healthy nutrition, cleanliness, healthcare, and education (UNICEF, no date a).

The effects of poverty during early childhood and beyond can have a lasting impact later in life where adults from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to experience unemployment, low income, criminal behaviour, and poor health (Miller and Hevey, 2016).

3.9 million children experiencing poverty in the United Kingdom have parents who are more likely to be in receipt of state benefits, live in social housing with one or both parents unemployed, (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023) however Hutchings *et al.* (2017) suggests children in Wales experience higher levels of poverty than the rest of the U.K due to low income, access to employment, affordable housing, rising living costs and rural economies (Senedd Cymru, 2018). Effects of poverty on children include delayed developmental milestones, poor attainment, challenging behaviour, malnourishment, poor emotional health, and wellbeing (Duncan, *et al.* 2012;).

Positive early years experiences are vital for healthy brain development, during the first 1000 days the home environment has the biggest impact for social, emotional, and cognitive development and positive interaction and support from parents and carers reduce the risk of developmental delay regardless of socioeconomic background (Hutchings, *et al.* 2017; Sylva, 2010). Gridley, Baker-Henningham and Hutchings (2016) argues that parents who have experienced poverty, themselves have poor language and communication skills in turn have a detrimental effect language acquisition and development if not detected early enough.

Vygotsky's theory suggests positive social interactions during childhood support language development and is essential for communication and behaviour (Bates, 2016; Aubrey and Riley, 2022). Early years practitioners are perfectly placed to support children and their

parents through early intervention and support programmes and make positive changes on child outcomes (Wilson, 2016; Charles *et al.* 2013).

Yoshinkawa (2013) suggests pre-school provision benefits children from all backgrounds however in particular has a positive effect on children living in deprivation, the report shows better outcomes for social emotional development when enabling children living in poverty to experience warm, safe, meaningful learning environments. Similarly, children from disadvantaged backgrounds showed significant improvement when attending quality pre-school provision and mixed with peers from varied social backgrounds (Sylva, 2010). The Welsh Government's Flying Start early years programme aims to target children ages from two to three years old and through a multidisciplinary approach including health visitor, parent support, speech, free part time childcare, language and communication intervention (Welsh Government, 2017).

The Welsh Government have invested heavily in early intervention through Flying Start with an intense health visitor service which promotes parent and infant bonding and positive home environment. Barriers to implementation include reluctance and refusal for parental engagement this is due to lack of understanding of nature for intervention, mistrust, multiple births, chaotic home life and fear of being judged, however, it is vital practitioners remain approachable, warm, and inviting, communicate clearly to parents, creating and building a trust to overcome barriers for early intervention (Holland and Watkins, 2015). However the Welsh Government has pledged a further £26 million to expand Flying Start provision to include all two year old children including those who live in areas of deprivation and is clear in the belief that early years intervention supports healthy development and ensures the best start in life for children in Wales (Welsh Government, 2022 b).

Food insecurity is becoming increasingly problematic for families in the United Kingdom (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2022). Food bank usage has become a widely used intervention when tackling food insecurity (Loopstra, 2018), this is due to the complexity of welfare reforms, benefit caps, rising food and energy costs directly impacting households with some waiting five weeks or more for a decision regarding entitlement resulting in destitution (Power, 2018; Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2022). Though food banks provide a crucial service to those experiencing food insecurities, the quality of nutrition included in the food parcel is inconsistent and not in line with dietary recommendations, furthermore, food banks are often

operated by volunteers and charities therefore it is difficult to meet the health needs of individuals and cultural requirements (Oldroyd, *et al.* 2022; Perry *et al.*). Oldroyd *et al.* (2022) argues though food banks are essential for people in poverty this service does not eradicate food insecurity and deprivation alone. Perry *et al.* (2014) suggests food bank usage can be reduced with a long-term approach, ensuring the benefits system is administered fairly to ensure income is secure to eliminate sudden loss of finances requiring emergency food bank, secondly, steps are put in place to support users in coping with money matters such as bill paying, food purchases and sign posting for advice in managing living costs.

Previously access to free school meals was limited to families in receipt of certain benefits, however, to support all families and children in Wales the Welsh Government aims to provide every child in primary school with universal free school meal by 2024 (Welsh Government, 2022c). However, criticism from Holford (2015) suggest rolling out free school meals to all children is an ill thought design at high cost and the vast majority of children in receipt will be from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. There is a suggestion that universal free school meals will mean families on benefits will no longer be easily identified which eliminates any stigma (Holford, 2015). The Welsh Government is committed to promoting the benefits of healthy eating, introducing a varied range of food for pupils, providing opportunities for children to interact with peers and develop social skills during lunchtime whilst improving behaviour (Welsh Government, 2022c).

Martin and O'Neill (2019) guidance aim to promote awareness amongst schools on the strategies for tackling poverty and how schools can support families to ease financial strains. Schools are under increased financial strain due to budget cuts however, it is vital practitioners strive for equity for all learners regardless of their economic background and making positive changes. The effects of poverty clearly have a detrimental effect on children through life however early intervention paves the way to break the cycle of create positive changes, key to this is forming relationships during the early years and providing interventions and support where needed.

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