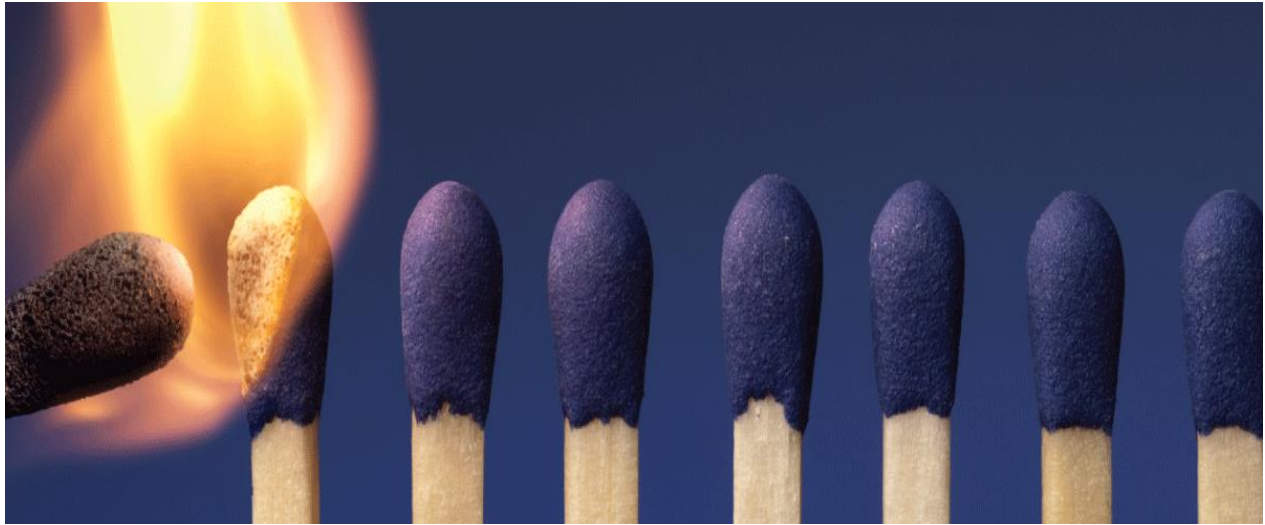




Source: Michel, 2019.

Catalytic Leadership

Portfolio

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Section 1.

Catalytic leadership is defined as a specific type of communication used in leadership work towards social justice, in a harmonious partnership with the community (Parker, 2020). It is a leadership aimed at transforming people, communities and organisations so that the problems which may arise within these groups or in society, are addressed and actions are taken towards permanently and positively changing them (Zachery, 2011). Although leadership in the early years may be different from that of an organisation, those who assume the leader's role must possess certain characteristics and abilities to be effective in their actions (Grantham Caston and Fontcurberta di Carlo, 2021). In an ever-changing complex world where innovations bring uncertainty for the future, catalyst leaders go beyond their conventional responsibilities, equipped with a different mindset to take a calculated risk while inspiring people around them to be involved and share responsibility for a common goal (Joiner, no date). This is explained by Hafford-Letchfield (2014) as being a 'post-heroic' type of leadership in which the leader is trustworthy, open-minded and responsible, facilitates collaboration at work, is open to contradictory discussions all the while being knowledgeable about interpersonal skills and highly capable of managing conflict. A catalytic leader will always work and inspire others to work to accomplish the community's aspirations, thus making the community a priority before any organisational or personal plans (Connor, no date). Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) talk about how leadership in the early years sector is generally perceived as a positive element, being seen as relational and interconnected, where people or groups of people who have certain personal qualities are capable of motivating and inspiring others to align to the same values and to pursue shared goals.

In the UK, change in the early childhood sector is driven by leaders who have the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), which enables them to lead practice while motivating and supporting the educators in their team (McDowall Clark, 2012). EYPS is defined as an advanced training program for leadership for early years educators which are usually not in a role of authority, who set off to become the 'catalysts for change and innovation' by enhancing the quality of early years provision and using their leadership role to positively impact children's learning, development and wellbeing (Department for Education, 2012, p. 12). Although EYPS

has proven to be successful, it is argued that it tends to focus on outcomes and improvement strategies because the training is involuntarily guided by a deficit model outlook (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016). In the same way, Sims *et al.* (2015) consider that the leadership training program in Australia, although qualitative, it grooms trainees to understand and follow the rules, thus remaining within the lines of the official discourse, rather than encouraging a critical approach to rules and empower leaders to create alternative viewpoints.

Catalytic leadership is linked with actions to educate children about social issues such as racism, poverty, homophobia or misogyny (Gandolfi and Mills, 2022). For instance, Allen, Burgess and Mayo (2017) talk about how teachers who have more experience tend to seek employment in more affluent areas, where attainment is higher and behavioural issues in children are not so prevalent, as opposed to younger, less-experienced teachers who either accept the opportunity to work in marginalised areas - a possible result of their idealistic mindset, or they are left with no other choice of employment. Furthermore, research has shown that teachers in schools serving disadvantaged communities think that working there is much harder and requires more educational skills, as opposed to teaching in a more affluent area, and they are also less enthusiastic about their career and more likely to leave their employment, should they find financially equal work opportunities (Allen and McInerney, 2019). As a result, as DeMatthews (2015) points out, schools in disadvantaged areas face more challenges in dealing with social inequalities and are usually less prepared than other schools to deal with the outcomes on children's lives.

However, if the disadvantaged communities are served by less-qualified educators who are more likely to leave their work and thus creating a large turnover of teachers in the school, children and their families will be deprived of the meaningful teacher-pupil-parent triad relationship, which is meant to enhance a child's wellbeing and instil a disposition towards learning (Steed, 2019). Meehan and Meehan (2017) think building a strong relationship between educators and families gives children better life outcomes, being one of the key responsibilities of early years leaders. Relating back to the information above, strong teacher - family relationships cannot be established if teachers are not invested in their role or if they resign after a short period of employment, therefore children's life chances are jeopardised.

Leaders in the early years environment ensure that practices are suitable for children and they also support and defend children and their families (Carroll-Meehan, Bolshaw and Hadfield, 2013). In addition, Coughlin and Baird (2013) state that early years leaders enable the formation of partnerships within the setting so that change can happen and they empower their colleagues to reflect and innovate existing teaching practices and learning methods.

Advocating for children and families can be challenging for early years leaders, mainly because of the multitude of issues families face in the context of today's society. Ryan (2006) asserts that leadership is not naturally linked with social justice, the link being conditioned by how leadership is initially created, from establishing relationships with other people to the common goals envisioned and the plan of action. In this sense, Keys Adair and Sachdeva (2021) believe social justice education is about learning how social injustices such as institutionalised racism, poverty, linguistic discrimination and others, impact children's lives, to support the understanding of these realities, to recognise injustice and to empower children and communities alike to stand for equity, equality and fairness. However, Gandolfi and Mills (2022) argue that one of the many challenges teachers in England face is having to divorce their moral values from their teaching, for example addressing social justice, to conform to certain goals or attainment targets. Teachers being censored to conform is not the only barrier for social justice work in the education sector. Wang (2018) addresses educator's attitudes, bias and a deficit model of viewing disadvantaged communities as obstacles for enacting social justice in schools. Berkovich (2014) highlights another constraint to social justice work is the isolation and exclusion of deprived social groups. From the information above, it can be concluded that the early years leader's role of responsibility for including and engaging with the community, is of significance as it can directly impact how children cope with the social issues affecting their lives.

There are other challenges to teachers becoming catalytic leaders. For instance, Sims *et al.* (2015) found out that the rapid pace at which change is happening in the early years sector is a challenge for leaders, who have to keep up not only with the educational and leadership developments which constantly require new regulations to be acted upon, but also with the political and social elements that are causing these changes. In the same way, Douglas (2019) talks about how certain policies can require additional expenses to settings, or new responsibilities

and expectations from leaders, but they can also act as time-savers for leaders to pursue their obligations. Furthermore, UNESCO (2021, p. 144) highlights that modern schools are driven by an ambition to perform at a certain national or international level in 'decontextualised examinations', thus altering children's educational experience. In the same way, Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) highlight how effective leadership is assessed based on children's academic attainment and quantifiable quality results. All of these mentioned above can act as hindrance towards the willingness of teachers to act or assume a leadership role.

Researchers suggest any person working in the early years sector has the potential to be a catalytic leader (Rodd, 2013; Torrance, 2013). However, on the one hand, research found that even educators with leadership training struggled to confidently assume their role as leaders, often times because of their own preconceived traditional notions of what leadership is or what it should look like (McDowall Clark, 2012; Sims, *et al.*, 2015). In Australia, the early years settings are now required to employ an early childhood leader (ECL), as the existing leaders may have been promoted to this role by occurrence, thus being underprepared to deal with the complexity of pedagogical leadership (Sims, *et al.*, 2015; Waniganayake, 2014). The extant educational leaders often felt underprepared and lacking support to act in their role, mainly because they were offered other responsibilities and the remaining time to undertake their role as leaders was limited, but also because their position was not made official and there was no clear description of their role and responsibilities, which creates ambiguity and confusion (Rouse and Spradbury, 2015). On the other hand, some educators realise they are in fact leading in their settings, only without the official title attached to their work, the realisation of it allowing them to reflect on what leadership is and reconstruct their understanding of the notion (McDowall Clark, 2012). Nicholson *et al.* (2020) argues that indeed, leadership is something that pertains to every position, not just to administrative roles. In this way, an early years practitioner is constantly in a position where they can influence and spark change, as they recognise new possibilities to practice and create the change, which represents the essence of catalytic leadership (McDowall Clark, 2012).

The spark of change in the educational sector can also happen as a result of a major event in the world. One example is the recent COVID-19 crisis. As Zhao (2020, p. 32) states, the pandemic has highlighted aspects of education which were

already under scrutiny, forcing educational institutions and governments across the globe to reflect and rethink the 'what, how and where' of leadership in educational provision, to give children a purpose for learning to be able to apply their knowledge in their life, or participate in designing their own learning based on their interests, to reinvent pedagogy and use different methods, tools and environments for teaching. In this way, COVID-19 appears to be the catalyst for reimagining education systems.

To conclude, meeting the complex needs of the current early years sector can be achieved through catalytic leadership. However, addressing the sociological issues that impact children's lives along with the intricate workings of leadership in education represent significant challenges to catalytic leaders and the early childhood workforce.

Section 2.

Currently, children and young people's rights are internationally proclaimed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is a legally binding treaty that institutes a detailed set of rights for children and young people to be protected by all the countries which have ratified the document (UK Government, 2010). However, research has identified inconsistencies and contradictions in the UNCRC text, drawing attention to the different meanings being attributed to children's human rights and the lack of transparency regarding the process of reaching consensus on said rights (Quennerstedt, Robinson and L'Anson, 2018). Nevertheless, UNCRC is internationally recognised as the pillar to inalienable rights of all the children and young people in the world.

International policy development has progressed in the last thirty years (Weil *et al.*, 2015). In Wales, following the creation of the National Assembly in 1999, a catalyst for the introduction of a children's commissioner's role was the report of Sir Ronald Waterhouse, which highlighted the need to ensure children's rights are protected (Clarke, 2002). Under the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Children's Commissioner for Wales Act 2001, the institution of Children's Commissioner for Wales was established and the person appointed in this position was to protect and promote the rights and wellbeing of children and young people (*Care Standards Act 2000; Children's Commissioner for Wales Act 2001*). The Children's Commissioner for Wales' role is to spread knowledge and empower young ones to know more about their rights in accordance with the UNCRC, being directly involved with children by listening to their opinions, giving advice in unfair treatment and also ensuring the decisions made by the Welsh Government and other organisations benefit and improve children and young people's lives (Children's Commissioner for Wales, no date). Children's Commissioner for Wales has an extensive function of powers including advocacy procedures, to undertake inquiry in exceptionally serious cases, whistleblowing, to provide information and advice, to individually help children and act in their best interest (Rees, 2013). However, even though the Children's Commissioner for Wales is set to operate independently from the government, it is, in fact, the First Minister of the Welsh Government who appoints a person in this role, albeit through a democratic and responsible process, as opposed to Scotland's

Commissioner who is elected by a parliament, therefore this could undermine the commissioner's independence (Rees and Williams, 2016).

Rees (2013, p. 185) critiques that the current foundation of Children's Commissioner for Wales role does not allow involvement in any 'non-devolved matters'. Non-devolved matters are areas where decisions are made by the UK Parliament and they apply to all countries in the UK (UK Parliament, 2023). This means that cases relating to asylum or immigration in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will be handled by the English Children's Commissioner (Rees, 2013). However, Dunford (2010) highlights the rationale that each Children's Commissioner should be responsible for all matters regarding children in their regions, irrelevant of them being devolved or non-devolved.

One of Children's Commissioner for Wales' roles is to be critical in their statements or reports regarding the government and public authorities (Rees and Williams, 2016). Building Blocks: Inclusion in the Foundation Phase is an investigative report which reveals the prevalence of Foundation Phase pupil exclusion between 2018 and 2019 to be alarmingly high (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). The spark for the investigation was the call of a parent whose six year old child was excluded from school due to belligerent behaviour and was not receiving education because the school and local authority did not reach a consensus regarding the child's return to school, revealing a weak inter-agency cooperation. Effective cooperation between local authorities, agencies, children's services and the educational sector is an important step in ensuring the wellbeing of children (Hadfield, Jopling and Needham, 2015). Thomas *et al.* (2015) believe that the future success of the Children's Commissioner for Wales depends on the effectiveness of the communication and cooperation with other public bodies, services, agencies, charities, media and so on.

Building Blocks report was an analysis of twenty-one cases of children who displayed socio-emotional behavioural difficulties (SEBD), who have been excluded from school or isolated, in the course of eighteen months, and the particularities of the issues mentioned in the report revolve around inconsistent education, lack of support for children and families and delays in recognising and addressing possible additional needs (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). Obsuth *et al.* (2022) highlight that school exclusion happens to already vulnerable children, a fact which is visible in Wales' school exclusion statistics showing that children with Additional

Learning Needs (ALN) or with a provision for ALN have the highest rate of being excluded (Welsh Government, 2022). This is reflected in Building Blocks' findings which state that sixteen out of twenty-one children in the report, had at least one symptom of an ALN, including Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or foetal alcohol syndrome (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020).

Teachers are among the first persons to identify possible ALN and offer appropriate support for children. However, identification of ALN is often challenging, as not all teachers are equipped to recognise the signs and symptoms (Jones, 2016). In addition, teachers were found to believe that approximately half the children with ALN are misdiagnosed due to pressure from parents (G L Assessment, 2017). That is why the Building Blocks report recommends to government authorities to prioritise the provision of professional ALN training to all Foundation Phase practitioners, in line with other researchers' suggestions (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020; NICE 2018; Smeets and Roeleveld, 2016). Moreover, the report critiques the Welsh Government guidance on exclusion for lacking a different set of directions for young children in the Foundation Phase years, it recommends changing the policies so that no child under the age of eight is excluded from school and to review any legislation on exclusion which is not in accordance with the UNCRC (Welsh Government, 2019; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020).

Children being excluded, being taught on a reduced schedule or in isolation means their educational provision is inconsistent, which is in contradiction with article 28 of the UNCRC stating the right to education and to dignified discipline in schools and with article 29 which states that education should support children in developing to their full potential, honing their personal traits, abilities and talents (UNICEF, 1990). Furthermore, excluding, teaching on a reduced timetable or isolating children with socio-emotional behavioural difficulties is inconsistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) which declares the right to have access to an inclusive, free and qualitative education where the individual needs are accommodated (United Nations, 2006).

Furthermore, Obsuth *et al.* (2022) draw attention to the negative impact permanent school exclusion can have on a young person's mental health and wellbeing, its consequences long-lasting into adolescence and early adulthood. The Building Blocks Report has found no permanent exclusions in the 2018-2019

Foundation Phase year. It did however show that one pupil was excluded eighteen times and another pupil, nine times in the course of a school year; other children were learning and playing isolated from their peers, or being taught on reduced schedules (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). It appears that professionals were trying to work around children's belligerence by establishing these punitive methods, the end goal for children being their full time return to school (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). However, the impact such measures can have on a child's wellbeing and mental health are unquantifiable. For that matter, the Building Blocks report recommends head teachers use the distributed leadership method to enable their staff to reflect, observe, discuss and apply appropriate effective strategies should such cases arise in their setting (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). The challenge in implementing such strategies might revolve around teachers' poor leadership skills, lack of time or unwillingness to assume such a role (Torrance, 2013).

The Building Blocks investigation recommendations to the Welsh Government include changing the guidance on school exclusion to include age-appropriate measures- as discussed above, and also to devise a strategy for schools to access early support in their endeavours to meet the needs of all children (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). As stated above, children who experience exclusion are already amongst the most vulnerable individuals in society, very likely to have additional learning needs, whose lives and families are often times affected by poverty and its consequences (Obsuth *et al*, 2022; Welsh Government, 2022a). Such children and their families' status in society have no influence over government policies, and the few advocates who might represent their cases have limited influence (McCluskey, Riddell and Weedon, 2015). Therefore, McCluskey, Riddell and Weedon (2015) point out that for change to happen, it must be done so that the rights of the child are guaranteed and the disparities between policies and practice are addressed and amended. This is in line with the UNCRC Article 3 which addresses the child's best interests (UNICEF, 1990).

To conclude, the Children's Commissioner role is to look after children and young persons' rights and welfare. The recommendations made in Building Blocks: Inclusion in the Foundation Phase report are in line with internationally recognised treaties. As it is expected, however, the process of implementing such changes will be challenging.

Section 3.

The complexity of the issues that impact children in today's society encompasses the Early Childhood Education and Care sector. In Wales, and other countries, education and care are approached separately, being attributed different meanings, which can undermine the provision of quality early years education (Gordon, Peeters and Vandekerckhove, 2016). Dallimore (2019) states that in countries where systems of education and care are not combined, higher levels of children are experiencing poverty and inequality, as opposed to countries whose systems are integrated where children are marginally less impoverished and experience far less inequality. UNESCO (2021) refers to the inequitable distribution of wealth in society and, subsequent, in the educational system, which translates into social segregation of the poor and lower levels of support to education offered to marginalised communities. This means schools in disadvantaged communities have to work harder to provide the same level of education to children.

Across the UK, poverty is constant in the lives of 3.9 million children (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2022). In Wales, statistics show that from 2018 to 2020, thirty one percent of children were living in relative income poverty which amounts to approximately one hundred ninety thousand children; the data from 2020 to 2021 shows thirty four percent of children in Wales living in poverty but the information is unreliable because of the COVID-19 disruptions (Welsh Government, 2022b). Across the UK, Wales has the highest rate of child poverty, mainly because of circumstances such as unemployment, single parenthood, lack of access to childcare, abuse, inadequate housing, teenage parenthood and others (Hughes and Davies, 2019). Young people who are raised in poverty are likely to suffer from nutritional deficiencies that affect their physical health in multiple ways, which in turn affects their physical progress, for instance - they are more likely to be overweight or obese, and also affects their mental development - their friendships and social life will suffer, also being more susceptible to bullying (Hughes and Davies, 2019; Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2017). Poverty also impacts children's rights as it hinders the enactment of Article 27 of the UNCRC which refers to children

having access to a standard living which fulfils their holistic development (UNICEF, 1990).

Following *Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010*, the Welsh Government has made efforts to eradicate child poverty. For that, a series of initiatives have been put forward such as Flying Start, Communities First, Pupil Deprivation Grant (now Pupil Development Grant, PDG), and Schools Challenge Cymru (Hughes and Davies, 2019). Although it is challenging to quantify the initiatives' success, it appears they had a positive impact on their end goals. For instance, Pupil Development Grant, accessed by schools on behalf of disadvantaged students to enable and to expand the children's extra-curricular activities and experiences by allowing them to take trips or attend various events, is considered by schools to be a vital resource in their quest to diminish marginalisation and inequality, and has helped children have a more positive attitude towards learning and education (Welsh Government, 2017). However, some schools have been blamed to use the PDG inappropriately, for instance to buy new technology instead of using the grant for raising children's educational achievements (Hughes and Davies, 2019).

Another example of anti-poverty initiative is the Flying Start programme, aimed at improving the lives of families and children under the age of four in deprived areas of Wales, offering quality childcare for two and a half hours each working day, thirty nine weeks per year. Deputy Minister for Social Services in Wales has stated Flying Start has positively impacted children and their families' lives (Welsh Government, 2022c). Data from Flying Start areas shows steady increase over the years in breastfeeding percentages and childhood immunisations (Welsh Government, 2021). However, the statistics show a decrease in the percentage of parents accepting childcare, 84% of them in 2020 - 2021 as compared to 86% the previous year, and 88% two years prior (Welsh Government, 2021). There is however a critical issue regarding Flying Start catchment areas, and how the most deprived communities in Wales live on the outskirts of these areas, therefore, a large number of children who would benefit from Flying Start support are excluded (BBC News, 2018). Even if the geographical areas of Flying Start will be expanded, how would impoverished parents assure daily transportation to their children?

In conclusion, it is clear from the information presented above that schools and education play a significant role in ensuring children's rights are respected and

their wellbeing is supported. Teachers and schools can attenuate the unfavourable effects of poverty on children from disadvantaged communities, but that can only be achieved through cooperation and support from other public authorities and services, working together to ensure the best outcomes for children and their families.

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