

Inclusive Leadership: Working together to support families.

Section 1:

Introduction:

The UNCRC sets out a duty to provide children with the right to an inclusive education to enable them to meet their highest potential (Unicef, 2022). However, Tempriou (2017) states that it is difficult to come to a definition of inclusion as it is so complex, but that inclusive practices involve showing respect to all cultural, social and economic backgrounds and ensuring that everyone has their voices heard. Moreover, Ferdman (2021) tells us that as leaders, being inclusive is crucial as this enables settings to foster a sense of belonging, allowing everyone to feel safe to participate fully without fear of judgement. Moreover, Ferdman (2021) explains that inclusive leadership is collaborative, based on relationship building and ensuring everyone's voice is heard and valued, ensuring that the workforce is inspired to foster inclusivity. This collaborative approach to leadership is further supported by Booysen (2020) who tells us that inclusive workforces have values and leadership based around collaboration, respect and co-construction rather than an authoritarian hierarchy where the decision-making sits in the hands of one person. This can be linked to both the curriculum for Wales and the curriculum for non-maintained nursery settings (Welsh Government, 2022a; Welsh Government, 2022c) which tells us that children need to foster a sense of belonging and cynefin to reach their highest potential and to build respectful relationships, feel safe, secure and valued within their settings. Moreover, Siraj and Hallet (2014) and Newstead and Isles-Buck (2019) agree that establishing a culture of belonging, value and respect is necessary to inclusive leadership and states that inclusivity is key to quality child-centered education and care. Furthermore, Siraj and Hallet (2014) explains that, despite not having the job title of 'leader', all early year's practitioners of all levels, from level 3 to a fully qualified teacher have an aspect of leadership within their role. This may be leading small group interventions, leading whole classes or whole settings or resourcing for the curriculum. It is therefore important to ensure staff understand and use behaviours and attitudes which promote inclusivity within the setting, through role modelling of inclusive practice. Additionally, Newstead and Isles-Buck (2019) tells us that inclusive practice does not have a final destination or a tick in the box, it is always changing, and so reflection offers settings opportunities to guide next steps and further training or changes to practices needed.

Scenario:

A 3 year old child attends nursery and is dropped off by mum, as she is a single unemployed parent. They often arrive late and on their walk from the settings gate to the door, mum removes her dummy and bottle. The child is still in nappies, although she is very independent in other areas of the setting. Mum is often the first in the line at pick up time and has lots of questions, both in person and via the settings seesaw, to ensure the child is happy and settled however the setting has never seen the child become unhappy on transition. One morning Mum comes forward to ask for support, she states that she moved to the area in South Wales from Ireland in 2018 and still does not have friends or a support system in place and struggles to socialise. She states that she has a mental health condition and a mental health nurse to support her, which she has not spoken about before due to the stigma attached to mental health concerns. She continues to state that she is finding her daughter's imminent transition into reception and full-time education daunting and is worried about how she will cope herself. She also fears that she is passing on her anxieties and mental health condition to her daughter. Mum acknowledges that she smokes as a coping mechanism and is feeling lonely. She seeks support during morning drop-off, as the other children are arriving with their parents. However, a staff member feels that this is not the correct time or place to speak to mum, as she is viewed as needy, and wants to send mum away, to return at a more convenient time. The setting's leader disagrees and invites mum in to support her.

Children:

Ensuring that the child feels a sense of belonging, safe and secure is part of government guidance (Welsh Government, 2022a; Welsh Government, 2022b) and underpinned by theory such as Froebel (Tovey, 2017). This enables children to feel included and removes some barriers to learning (Tempriou, 2017). Without the supportive connections outside of the settings environment, the child and her mother within this scenario could be in greater need of connections and friendships within the setting (Action for Children, 2024) placing importance on the settings ability to be open and create respectful relationships. Sending mum away could close these relationships and therefore would not provide the child with adequate support. This is supported by findings in Loose *et al.* (2023) which state that parental loneliness can adversely affect a child's mental health and well-being. Moreover, Action for Children (2017) continues to say that those with parents who suffer from mental health illness can be at greater risk of social isolation. Additionally, Action for Children (2017) tells us that when a parent suffers from loneliness this can have an adverse effect on the child's ability to socialise and they are at greater risk of becoming chronically lonely themselves. Furthermore, Nowland *et al.* (2021) found that a mothers' loneliness also affected the child's ability to develop problem solving skills, potentially affecting the child's academic outcomes. Therefore, it is important that the setting supports mum to create a network of support for herself and her child, ensuring they feel safe, heard, welcome and that they belong.

Martin (2017) found that children's mental health is rife and that there is a link between low socioeconomic background and poor mental health in children. Also, NSPCC (2024) states that children cared for by parents suffering from poor mental health may become young carers for their family and find it difficult to make and maintain friendships in school. Child Poverty Action Group (2024) also tells us that children growing up in poverty are at risk of becoming unemployed adults or low-income families themselves, therefore the support provided immediately may enable the family to take steps to avoid this.

Family:

Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (2021b) tells us of the challenges faced by settings when encouraging parental engagement and that it is important that practitioners have support and training to facilitate this. Rodd (2013) argues that inclusive relationships with the families is an important aspect to create a quality childcare and education provision which will also support children's progression and that settings should foster these relationships. Parents should be acknowledged as the child's first educator (Caerphilly Early Years and Childcare Service, no date; Della Porta *et al.*, 2022; Welsh Government, 2022a) and this should be supported to continue, and parents and settings should foster a sense of partnership (EEF, 2021b). Newstead and Isles-Buck (2019) support this however tell us that occasionally there can be friction between settings meeting children's rights and the wishes of families which requires delicate handling by the setting leaders. It is important that both settings and parents are open and honest with each other. This links to the importance of relationships so that children are not disadvantaged by other people's values and beliefs. However, EEF (2021a) argues that simply engaging with parents is not enough to support progression and that more intervention and guidance is needed to see progress as parents may lack the knowledge required to support, especially as the children move through early years and on to key stage 2 and beyond. Additionally, EEF (2021a) continues to state that settings should be mindful of family contexts to ensure inclusivity – for example ensuring parents from low-income families are not excluded due to not having access to resources such as the internet. Moreover, Scanlan and Johnson (2020) suggest that parents, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds, can feel inferior to the practitioners or teachers and that this can cause a barrier to their active participation in school life.

With that said, stigma can cause families to disengage with settings (Rethink Mental Illness, no date). During a survey of 1,300 people with mental illness, Rethink Mental Illness (2021) states that 86% of respondents stated that fear of other peoples' perceptions of them inhibited them reaching out for support. Mind (2023) tells us that when a family moves from one area to another, especially if they have no other friends or family in the new area, they can become lonely. Moreover, those that suffer with poor mental health are more likely to feel lonely. However, Mind (2023) also states that people with underlying mental health problems can become stuck in a loop of feeling lonely which damages their mental health, then their mental health causing them to avoid social situations which could have alleviated the loneliness and so the loneliness worsens. This is supported by Loose *et al.* (2023) and Action for Children (2017)

who state that loneliness had affected mental health, and that loneliness can cause parents physical health problems similar to the effects of smoking cigarettes. Moreover, Action for Children (2017) found that parents who were out of work, such as the parent in this scenario, are more likely to feel lonely. Additionally, Loose *et al.* (2023) found that the mental health of families in low socioeconomic groups experienced a greater risk of mental illness and loneliness. This further supports the need for intervention when the parent asks for support and that sending her away may be damaging to the relationships within the setting, not inclusive and damaging to the home life of the child.

Professionals:

O'Sullivan (2015) tells us of the need for open and honest discussions, ensuring parents are fully listened to, to avoid future confrontation or upset. Being open to parents enables us to break down some of the barriers that may have formed by mental health illness, for example through the stigma associated with this. When a parent comes into a setting with a concern, it is important that the practitioners can listen and offer support as this enables settings to strengthen the trusting, respectful relationships (Birth to 5 matters, no date b). This is supported by Children's Commissioner for Wales (2020) report which states that parents need to be supported to find the correct help, and not turned away while seeking support. Moreover, Newstead and Isles-Buck (2019) tells us that an inclusive leader must show other practitioners a role model of good inclusive practice, such as creating an open and accepting environment, as well as challenging any behaviour which is not inclusive. In support of this O'Sullivan (2015) explains that inclusive leaders should enthuse other practitioners around the vision and values of the setting. Moreover, Welsh Government (2017) states that parents with mental health illness may require more targeted support and that settings should be open to adapting services to meet their needs. Additionally, Welsh Government (2022a) tells us that practitioners should be responsive to the lived experiences of children and their families to ensure equitability and inclusivity within settings. Therefore, it is not inclusive to send mum away as sending parents away when they are seeking support could hinder future relationships and stop them from seeking support in the future. Additionally, Ferdman (2021) tells us that in such instances where it is clear to leaders that practice is not being inclusive, it is the leader's role to challenge this behaviour and inspire the workforce to foster inclusivity.

Tempriou (2017) tells us that within education and early years there is a confusion between what is leadership and what is management. This confusion can cause barriers to parents receiving support as it may be unclear whose role it is within the setting to offer such support and guidance. This is further supported by Martin (2017) who tells us that clear job roles are important to multi-agency and team working. This is supported by Chemanais (2009) who states that roles and responsibilities can be unclear in multi-agency working, creating a barrier to quality provision for the family. Siraj and Hallet (2014) discuss shared and distributed leadership where practitioners all have their own areas of expertise and work together to provide the best care to the families. This ensures that there is a sense of inclusion between the professionals as they all feel valued and that they contribute to the shared vision.

Chemanaïs (2009) tells us that working collaboratively in a multi-agency approach provides the child with improved outcomes if the leadership can navigate the barriers with clear vision, funding and an understanding of the roles of all professionals. Booysen (2020) tells us that having a shared set of values and a vision can create a relational leadership style which is inclusive of all and enables everyone to feel heard and valued. Furthermore, NSPCC (2023) states that professionals must have a shared understanding of each professional's role and responsibility within the team working. Furthermore, O'Sullivan (2015) states that good communication is key to ensuring consistency across settings and within multiagency teams and tells us of the importance of clarification of understanding. Additionally, Siraj and Hallet (2014) tells us that it is important to form relationships and be open to communicating respectfully with outside agencies. Siraj and Hallet (2014) continues to state that this is because it would be unrealistic to assume that one leader could have in-depth knowledge of all agencies and services. However, Children's Commissioner for Wales (2020) explains that there are experiences where multiagency teams fail to find this level of leadership due to a lack of understanding of the individual professionals' area of expertise or remit and suggests that a structural plan be established to have a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities. Therefore, practitioners need to work with other professionals, including outside agencies, to meet the children's needs in their settings. However, Randel *et al.* (2018) explains that there are challenges to being an inclusive leader, including finding a balance between fostering the sense of belonging and inadvertently creating a culture of conformity, where the practitioners lose their sense of autonomy.

Community:

Communities such as those found in and around schools are multi-cultural, multi-racial and have a range of different demographic diversities and social categories, bringing together families from a variety of different contexts. It is important that leaders can cross the boundaries found between the beliefs and values of these different groups and bring the people in their communities together (Scanlan and Johnson, 2020). Ferdman (2017) asks how communities such as these can be inclusive and embrace diversity while also fostering a sense of belonging, if we all have different values and beliefs. Ferdman (2017) suggests that to belong to a large group individuals adapt to find their commonalities with others, however, individuals need to keep their sense of identity to feel included. Therefore, Ferdman (2017) states that practitioners and communities need to be more aware of others' feelings and opinions and accepting of others.

NSPCC (2024) states that with poor mental health, parents may also be experiencing other significant disadvantages such as poor housing, substance misuse and unemployment and further states that with multiple challenges parents can find it difficult to provide children with adequate and loving care. Martin (2017) supported this and states that the health, education outcomes and social inequality, that a child and family experiences, are all connected and need collaborative work between agencies to improve children's lives. Martin (2017) also tells us that multi-agency groups require a shared set of values and

common goals to ensure a positive outcome for the child. Siraj and Hallet (2014) further states that multi-agency working is important to ensure the best outcomes for children and requires strategic leadership which supports delegation and a collaborative leadership style across the agencies. Through such collaborative, partnership working within the setting, and with other agencies as additionally suggested by Ferdman (2021), the family could be referred to support from the settings Family Liaison Officer (FLO), who can point them in the direction of support groups outside of the setting itself for example the 'TLC cafe' which is a volunteer led community cafe. However, as mum finds it difficult to connect and form relationships, due to her mental health and loneliness, it is important that the setting staff keep in contact and employ an open-door policy for mum to communicate how she is feeling and when further support is needed without fear of stigma.

Section 2:

Baldock, Fitzgerald and Kay (2013) tell us that a policy is a document which specifies and advises a course of action or responsible practices and that the document will advise who the action is intended for with a set of specific instructions. However, Baldock, Fitzgerald and Kay (2013) also discuss what they believe to be a misconception that policy makers are out of touch with practice, that they are often written with no regard to how they can be implemented by practitioners. This is also discussed in OECD (2021) and they state that confusion can be caused by a lack of shared understanding and common terminology. With that said, it is further argued that policies are considered documents and that by understanding the importance of policy practitioners may be able to correctly implement them (OECD, 2021).

Dallimore (2019) states that policy can reflect a country's cultural practices, history and the work of the government at the time. This is also supported by Sibieta (2024) who tells us that government approaches could explain the current challenges faced in attainment in Wales. Moreover, Sibieta (2024) argues that the poor educational performance in Wales, in comparison to England, could be explained by the writing of policy in Wales and its implementation. Additionally, Dallimore (2019) states that the variety of government departments and range of different settings, and therefore the differing ways in which policy is interpreted and implemented, could explain the barriers to delivery. This evidences the need for clear guidance from government policy and practitioners that are effectively implementing these policies.

The recent implementation of a curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings sets out to create better outcomes for children, and to instill belonging and inclusion of diversity within children and practitioners (Welsh Government, 2022a). The policy talks of 'Cynefin' as a feeling which encompasses the pride and belonging to the community and culture of Wales (Welsh Government, 2022a). This is also a rights-based curriculum which aims to ensure children are beginning to understand their own rights as set out in the UNCRC and the need to respect the rights of others (Welsh Government 2022a; Welsh Government, no date). This enables the government to ensure that they are meeting the criteria of Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011, through giving children educational awareness of their rights Senedd Cymru (2024). Additionally, Welsh Government (2024b) states that inclusive practice is a priority for Welsh Government. However, Unicef (2022) explains that 1 in 10 children across the world are living with a disability and are 25% less likely to access early years provisions. Moreover, as disabilities occur across the ages, genders, sexual orientations and races, children who are disabled can face an intersectionality of discrimination, meaning they face multiple barriers (Unicef, 2022). Welsh Government (2024b) tells us that the government has a priority aim to ensure that all children have the optimal start to their lives including those with ALN and other barriers to their learning without discrimination. Moreover, Welsh Government (2022a) states that diversity should be represented within the setting's environment and resources. Likewise, England (no date) and Pacey (no date) tell us that ensuring that the books on offer have a diverse range of cultures, religions, children's family contexts and disabilities evident within them enables children to see themselves within the setting. Therefore, changes in policy, such as the roll-out of a new curriculum can create the need for extra funding (Baldock,

Fitzgerald and Kay, 2013) such as to enable the purchase of diverse resources. Despite Welsh Government (2021) suggesting £150 million has been made available post covid 19 and Welsh Government (2023a) stating it was providing £10 million in funding to the early years for childcare spaces, NAHT (2024) tells us that funding is sparse within education in Wales in the current climate due to a lack of government funding to cover the recent pay deal, meaning that resources are lower on the priorities within schools.

However, Pemberton (2022) tells us of strategies that can be used without the need for extra funding with practitioners who read widely to improve their cultural knowledge to enable them to have meaningful discussions with the families of their setting. Listening to families and the voice of all children, displaying family photos, using nursery rhymes from all cultures of the setting, and by doing so as cultural appreciation not appropriation in a tokenistic way ensures that the children feel included in the setting (Pemberton, 2022). Moreover, in doing so Ferdman (2021) tells us that professionals are being inclusive leaders. The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings sets out the importance of quality relationships with children and caregivers, so that all children thrive (Welsh Government, 2022a). Pacey (no date) argues that the use of culturally diverse children's tv programs also enables children within the setting to connect with what they are watching. This is additionally supported by Department for Education (2024), although written for English settings has valid advice for early years settings. It agrees with the need to listen to the voices of the families and states with practitioners who are confident in their values regarding diversity, they can engage in meaningful conversations with families in order to create a sense of belonging for the children, Furthermore, Department for Education (2024) explains that low cost local trips to the community will enable children to grasp the diversity of their communities and the wealth of learning available. Unicef (2022) tells us that engaging with children and the interactions which support typically developing children are sometimes not provided for children with a disability. Providing such interactions, with no impact on funding, supports all children to meet their fullest potential.

Moreover, Welsh Government (2022a) and Welsh Government (2024a) also argue that where possible diversity should be evident in the workforce so that the children are able to recognise themselves and their religion and cultures in the practitioners that provide care for them. It is important that a setting does not adopt the belief of children cannot distinguish race (Birth to 5 matters, no date a). Pacey (2022) explains that where there is underrepresentation in a sector, that is likely to be a continuous cycle as it is difficult to draw more diverse professionals if they cannot see themselves in the settings either.

Section 3:

Do school uniforms encourage inclusivity or exclusion for children living in poverty?

Welsh Government (2016), Welsh Government (2022a) and Welsh Government (2022b) encourage settings to foster belonging and inclusivity in a child centered approach to improve children's wellbeing, however how do school uniforms fit into that?

Reidy (2021) argues uniforms do not have a positive outcome on children's educational progress. Additionally, uniform policies cause instances of needing to sanction children when incorrect uniform is worn (Welsh Government, 2016).

Insisting on uniform can be detrimental to the relationship building between teacher and student, which can then create barriers to learning due to the breakdown in relationship. Additionally, the design of school uniforms can also hinder incidental opportunities for physical exercise, which can have a detrimental effect on children's health (Reidy, 2021).

However, Gov.uk (2023), Ramalynn Academy (2024), Action for Children (2023) and Children's Commissioner for Wales (no date) state that uniforms should create a school community and remove stigmas that may be caused by the wearing or not wearing of fashionable clothing. Department for Education (2021) states it "Strongly encourages schools to have a uniform" due to the view that wearing a uniform creates a whole setting identity and can create an environment for learning.

This is supported by Action for Children (2023) and Children in Wales (2019) who state that not affording uniform can create feelings of social isolation. However, Department for Education (2021) tells us that uniform should not become a barrier to education. Therefore, settings should set the tone for uniform through an inclusive uniform policy, ensuring that the uniform is inclusive in its design enabling children to access physical play and ensuring that it is adaptable to individuals and not rigid. This ensures that children can make choices which also allows inclusivity for religious beliefs and personal choice. Department for Education (2021) suggests that children are actively involved in the policy's creation, to ensure their voices are heard.

Children from low-income families may be able to access uniform more easily if the branded items (logos printed on them) are kept to a minimum, or ideally not used at all (Department for Education, 2021). Grice (2022) argues that logos on uniforms are more expensive than plain uniforms, which places unnecessary pressure on parents. Welsh Government (2023b) states logos should not be compulsory. Children in Wales (2029) tells us that branded items can cost up to 3 times more than supermarket uniforms, which is a significant cost implication for low-income families. However, does this also allow for exclusion, not inclusion? Should parents who can afford to purchase items that are branded do so, this may highlight that those who do not have branding could be from low-income families and cause instances of bullying, and therefore causing absenteeism as suggested by Department for Education (2021) and Children in Wales (2019). Should schools choose not to have logos at all this would alleviate any potential for

disparity between low-income families' choices of uniform and higher income homes, as all children would be wearing unbranded clothing, making them more inclusive.

Another strategy for an inclusive uniform, as suggested by Gov.uk (2023), Department for Education (2021) and Welsh Government (2023b) is reusing uniforms, perhaps in a school uniform swap shop for example. Keep Wales Tidy (no date) and Welsh Government (2023b) tells us that swap shops empower parents and settings and help with sustainability. Children's Commissioner for Wales (no date) tells us it is important to do this while removing the stigma attached to second-hand clothing and encouraging whole settings to see the value in sustainability.

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