

Create strategies to support inclusive classroom practice and a
reflection on their effectiveness in the classroom

Our focus on 'every child' in our motto reflects our commitment to providing an inclusive education for all pupils and ensure that they have access to a curriculum that actively seeks to recognise, promote and celebrate each individual. Our approaches to inclusion and high-quality teaching mirrors the vision set out by Welsh Government in 'Education in Wales: Our National Mission, Action Plan 2017-21' which states its commitment to putting "equity and excellence at its core and help develop our young people as confident, capable and caring citizens" (Welsh Government, 2017).

Our approach to inclusion continues to evolve and develop in line with new guidance and legislation. Pupil wellbeing, additional learning needs (ALN) and equity of access have been part of our school improvement plan since our inspection in 2016. The implementation of the new curriculum in Wales and the Additional Learning Needs Education Tribunal (Wales) Act, 2018 (the Act), have made these objectives even more prominent.

In line with the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales, 2021 (the Code), our approach to inclusion is that it is 'everybody's business'. In the past teachers have reported feeling under prepared to teach pupils with ALN and lacking the skills or experience to provide effectively for the range of abilities within their settings (OFSTED, 2004). Through discussions with staff during performance management cycles we realised this was also true of teachers. The Code (Welsh Government, 2021) states "all staff who work with children and young people with ALN have a responsibility for ensuring that their learners' needs are identified and provided for." Therefore, we have committed to providing additional professional training and support for all staff. This is in addition to our ongoing commitment to cluster working alongside our feeder secondary school and primaries.

In the term 'inclusion' means more than just providing support for our learners with ALN. Inclusion is striving to develop a sense of community among our students and families where everyone is welcome and valued.

We recognise the need for belonging and acceptance as stated by Qvordrup and Qvordrup (2018) “...inclusive education includes not only the physical and social dimension of educational practice, but also the psychological dimension (the experience of being included)...”.

Our school community is made up of a diverse population so it is necessary to think flexibly about how to foster a sense of togetherness and belonging. Most children come from working families and there is a small percentage (9%) of children who access free school meals. This number has gradually increased from 7.7% in 2018 which is in line with the trend across the city (Cardiff Council, 2018). However, it is still lower than many schools in our area. Our families speak 23 different languages and 15% of children do not have English as their first language. There are currently 11% of pupils with identified Additional Learning Needs (ALN) which is less than many schools across Cardiff and significantly less than in previous years due to the revised definition of ALN in the Code (Welsh Government, 2021). We provide an open and fair access to learning for all of our students and actively promote diversity through celebrations, literature and community links in order to support the development of pupils who may in the past have been ‘marginalised’ as suggested by Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006).

Inclusion of students and families with ALN within the school is an ongoing priority reflected in our school improvement plan. Ainscow (2020) suggests that an inclusive approach to schools has benefits on an educational, social and economic level. On an educational level, pupils are faced with thoughtful, reflective and responsive teachers who cater for individual students which benefits all children and from a social point of view, these pupils are being nurtured in a non-discriminatory society. Finally, economically, it is far more cost effective to educate all children together rather than provide for specialised education for just a few.

We support children and their families with a range of different needs from complex medical needs to speech and language difficulties, autism and behavioural needs. Our support network includes working closely with specialist teachers, educational psychologists, speech and language therapist and health and social care professionals. Along with our cluster schools, we value this collaborative way of working as research suggests

“this has the potential to significantly enhance their (*the children’s*) quality of life and social, physical, emotional and intellectual development” (Hodkinson, 2019).

Our ‘Person Centred Approach’ (Welsh Government, 2015) is not a unique stance but one that has been adopted across many schools within Wales as proposed in legislation including Education in Wales: Our National Mission (Welsh Government, 2017), the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (Welsh Government, 2015) and the ALNET (Wales) Act 2018 (Welsh Government, 2018). These key pieces of legislation along with guidance such as the ALN Code of Practice (Welsh Government, 2021) and Great Teaching Toolkit (Coe *et al*, 2020) have reframed inclusion and ALN to be for everybody and about everybody. The key messages from all of these documents is that good teaching of ALN is good teaching for all pupils and inclusive strategies adopted for pupils with specific challenges including English as an additional language, are good strategies for all pupils. In short, an inclusive classroom with high aspirations for all pupils is more likely to have higher outcomes, higher engagement and higher sense of wellbeing (Coe *et al*, 2020).

During the next half of this paper I will discuss strategies that I have employed to support inclusion within our reception classes and training that I have offered to others around the subject. I will be using Kolb’s reflective cycle to structure my thoughts in order to offer a full insight into the strategies, their purpose and the outcome.

My role in school is Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo) and I have teaching responsibilities in our reception classes for one afternoon per week. In the absence of having a nursery, this is a vital time for me as ALNCo as I am able to assess the level of need within the cohort and offer support to children and their families as they enter the school system.

The reception classes were made up of two classes of 30 pupils. Within these classes there was a high level of unidentified ALN, behaviour difficulties as a result of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and general learning needs that required additional support. The baseline for this cohort was particularly low in

comparison with previous years and we realised that different approaches were needed in order to foster a sense of belonging, trust and safety.

During the afternoons that I was teaching the behaviour of the children would often be very challenging. They struggled to cope with the change of staff and the different approaches to classroom management that this brought with it. We saw extreme behaviours where children were clearly distressed and staff required more bespoke training to deal with these outbursts and protect themselves physically and emotionally.

Staff within the unit were visibly drained and reported losing teaching time for the majority of children as they were busy fire-fighting and dealing with children's meltdowns rather than keeping up with their learning tasks. There was a sense of guilt that a minority of children were taking so much time and energy from staff and leaving others without what they needed to succeed in their first term of school. As a result of this the classes felt 'on edge' and unsettled. As ALNCo I needed to consider was of supporting staff, pupils and our families to ensure that all pupils received the best possible start in school.

Research such as Ainscow (2020) suggests that providing an inclusive education is not just about the introduction of individual techniques but about the organisational arrangements and processes of learning in a social setting. Therefore, the first strategy I employed was to coordinate a multi-agency approach. By building a team around the children and working for a shared goal we felt that we had the greatest opportunity for success. The strategy involved coordinating time, resources and professionals in addition to effective monitoring and evaluation.

Our first meeting included all staff within the unit. Using our focussed Effective Early Learning (EEL) observations we discussed in detail what we were seeing in the classroom. From this we mapped out trigger points for individual children and considered approaches to combat these. Approaches included changing the structure of the day in order to offer more time for 'meet and greet' in the mornings and changing the layout of the classrooms to make them less stimulating. In addition to this we set up a weekly meeting for all staff and myself in order to monitor and evaluate the approaches used.

The next layer to the multi-agency approach was to request support from specialist practitioners. Our educational psychologist and specialist teachers for Early Years and Emotional Health and Wellbeing observed the reception classes and spoke with staff about what they were experiencing with particular focus on behaviours that were more extreme. From their experience these professionals were able to offer background and insight into some of the difficulties being expressed by the children. For staff this added a renewed level of compassion and understanding which in turn supported them to persevere with given strategies.

The educational psychologist was able to focus our attention on a small number who required the most support. By providing support to these pupils effectively, it was felt that this would have a calming effect on the remainder of the year group. From this each teaching assistant was allocated a child to be their key worker and trusted adult. Their role was to meet and greet the child and provide regular wellbeing check-ins throughout the day. My role was to support the teaching assistants by providing them with more information regarding the children's specific needs and background. By sharing this sensitive information, particularly with regard to our looked after children, I was able to develop a greater sense of understanding among the staff about individuals. This enabled them to see behaviour as a means of communication rather than disruption.

Key to the successful inclusion of all pupils is the engagement of parents and carers (Ainscow, 2020). Each parent/carer of the identified children was offered an appointment to speak with the class teacher and myself. Through a Person Centred Planning (PCP) approach we focussed on what was working, what could be better and what we needed to do to support the children going forward. These meetings resulted in further referrals and the setting of SMART targets. The challenges we faced in these meetings were quite different depending on the family. In some cases, parents/carers did not recognise the behaviours that we were seeing in school which led to discussions about why children were behaving differently in different settings. Yet in other cases parents/carers were desperate for support but had been unwilling to ask or

unaware of where to look for it. It was important to foster good relationships with these families and take lots of opportunities to include them in school life and foster their own sense of safety and wellbeing within the school community.

A multi-agency approach in this instance enabled parents/carers, teachers and professionals to have a voice. In a very open forum staff were able to name their challenges and address insecurities around approaches, particularly for our most vulnerable looked after children who were demonstrating signs of acute distress during the school day. We were able to identify training needs and signpost parents to support. By bringing a range of professionals together we had a vast range of experience and knowledge to draw on which meant we were able to provide bespoke support for individual children and their families. Research by Abbot *et al.*, (2005) reflects this common sense of positivity among staff who cooperate and collaborate in this way.

All staff created valuable opportunities to really get to know the children and their families which led to a sense of achievement particularly when children began to settle and show signs of feeling safe. This was also reflected in the research conducted by Abbot *et al.* (2005) where they found that staff “reported improvements to their working lives in areas such as professional development, communication, collaboration with colleagues, and relationships with families with disabled children.”

All staff were keen to develop new ideas and strategies however, at times were guilty of trying too many things at once. For example, using behaviour reward charts, now and next cards and traffic lights symbols soon became confusing and overwhelming. More importantly, with so many strategies being used at the same time and for different children, it was impossible to achieve consistency which they so greatly needed. The Education Endowment Foundation report ‘Improving Behaviour in Schools’ (Collins, Sir Prof. K, 2019) has consistency as one of its three main recommendations for successful behaviour management in schools so we had to balance this with offering personalised approaches and individual learning opportunities.

Our first review meeting was focussed on reducing the number but improving the quality of our strategies. We needed to consider our ‘universal provision’ more carefully to ensure that we supported as many

children as possible and achieve consistency. We chose to focus on a visual timetable for all children and on using visuals of now/next for groups or individuals. This reduction in strategies meant that all staff were more engaged and were beginning to understand the importance of maintaining a joined-up, consistent approach.

Dealing with particularly challenging behaviour in the classes was an area that needed addressing both in terms of staff training but also staff confidence. Many staff felt unprepared to deal with difficult outbursts such as lashing out, kicking or spitting and often did not see why they should put themselves in harm's way in order to help regulate a child. As a result, a limited few were dealing with this on a more regular basis which caused fractures to form within the team. These fractures could be felt within the setting, the team and ultimately began to affect the children's behaviour.

Staff were increasingly tired and frustrated and as a result, were struggling to give the children the positivity and praise that they needed. This situation arose because the meetings that we had set aside each week did not happen as planned. Either they were cancelled or staff were missing due to other commitments around the school. When working with such a large team of staff it was vital that this line of communication remained open and for a while it was not.

We also faced challenges with the involvement of professionals outside of education particularly in terms of health professionals and social services. Two of the pupils required input from social services and had allocated social workers. Although all parties involved supported a multi-agency approach, due to time constraints and a high turnover of staff, getting social services involved at all levels was incredibly challenging. Social services provided support to families in the home however, did not always have time to work with school. This meant that we were missing opportunities to provide the children with consistent approaches to their behaviours at home and in school.

Health professionals were also unable to attend many of the planning meetings due to the constraints on their time. A number of pupils were being assessed for neurodevelopmental difficulties however, progress

of these referrals was not always communicated and support for school was limited. The focus of collaboration in the ALNET (Wales) Act 2018 places “a duty on health bodies, local authorities, maintained schools and other bodies to provide information and other help to local authorities that request it” (Welsh Government, 2018. Section 65) which will aim to provide more open lines of communication between education and health. Therefore, in the future we hope that this situation improves and that there can be clear lines of communication across professions.

Working collaboratively through a multi-agency approach is not a new strategy for services supporting children and young people. Cheminais (2009) suggests that this way of working can be dated back to the mid-1800s where health and social workers came together to raise the status of poor families in England. The approach is widely supported by politicians and can be seen at the forefront of many of their policies. For example, The Children Act 1989 and the ‘Every Child Matters’ (DfES, 2003) agenda saw the beginning of legislation promoting ‘greater partnership’. The Children Act declared that health, social care and education should all work collaboratively. However, only in the Children’s Act 2004 and subsequent Children and Families Act 2014 did this become a legal requirement.

Despite its promotion among professionals as being a successful way of working, research suggests that there can be grave failings of these services largely due to a lack of communication. Hodkinson (2019) points towards the death of Maria Colwell in 1977 as being a turning point for this approach as an inquiry into her death cited lack of communication as being a ‘major contributory cause’ in her death. Sadly, we do not need to look so far back to see these stories repeated in the news. Recent news stories are a stark reminder of how far services need to go in order to support and protect our most vulnerable young people (Mistry,P. 2021).

Many of the challenges that I faced when leading a multi-disciplinary approach have been identified in literature. In their research ‘Multi-Agency Working: A Detailed Study’, Atkinson *et al.* aimed to find out what made successful multi-agency working and what the challenges most commonly faced were. They also aimed

to find out at what level (strategic, tactical or operational) the majority of the challenges were faced. The seven main areas of challenge for this way of working were found to be: “fiscal resources, roles and responsibilities, competing resources, non-fiscal resources (time, staff, space), communication, professional and agency cultures and management” (Atkinson *et al.*, 2002).

Through my experiences I faced the challenges outlined here and would agree with Hockings (2010) that in order to promote inclusion in our settings we must have “institutional commitment to and management of inclusive learning and teaching” (Hockings, 2010) alongside the fundamentals of curriculum design, delivery and assessment. Although Hockings’ synthesis of research findings is based around higher education settings, I feel that this still relates to situations that we face on a primary school level.

When considering how best to change or develop my practice in the future, I found the research from Atkinson *et al.* (2002) and their review in 2005 most relevant. In addition to highlighting the challenges of a multi-disciplinary approach, they also conducted research into what makes good multi-agency working. I have used this as the basis for my reflection on my own practice and a guide for developing my skills in the future.

Atkinson *et al.* (2002) list positive traits, actions and trends that support successful multi-agency working. I have reflected on these to see where I can learn from mistakes and make multi-agency working further embedded into the school in the future. The areas that I have chosen to focus on are the two most commonly cited in the research which are commitment or willingness, understanding roles/responsibilities (Atkinson *et al.* 2002) along with communication.

When considering commitment or willingness I feel there are a number of layers to reflect on. There is the commitment of school staff and professionals, the commitment of parents/carers and the commitment of the children themselves. Despite their young age, we require children to be committed to being a part of their school community and to act accordingly. The Code (Welsh Government, 2021) puts children firmly at the centre of any approaches involving ALN therefore the multi-agency approach must reflect this.

Considering the involvement of children within the process, particularly our youngest children will be something that we aim to develop in our setting in the coming years through the use of one-page profiles and person centred meetings.

School staff and professionals have a high level of commitment to their work. There are few within this community of professionals that would look at a challenge for a particular child and not agree to do everything within their power to support them. However often those professionals are not 'on the ground' implementing strategies themselves. Therefore, what Atkinson, Doherty & Kinder (2005) found in their research review reflects what we experienced during our multi-agency working. That is that "multi-agency working could not be sustained by commitment at strategic or operational level alone and that a 'bottom up' as well as a 'top down' approach was essential." (Atkinson, Doherty & Kinder, 2005).

Reflecting on our processes I feel there needs to be a renewed focus on upskilling, building confidence and supporting teaching assistants and parents to ensure that they understand the purpose of the interventions that they are providing. By working in this way, we will be ensuring compliance with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 five principles of working. One of which is to "...seek to maintain an emphasis on prevention, in terms of early interventions with children to reduce the risks of difficulties in later life." (Welsh Government, 2015)

Fredrickson and Cline (2015) argue that "at an individual level many factors impede successful collaboration between professionals from different disciplines." I saw this to be true during my experience of running a multi-disciplinary team however, it is important to consider how best to overcome this in the future. A lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different professionals involved in the process caused some challenges. Although as professionals we are aware of the roles that others play when supporting children. It is impossible to know the demands that everyone has on their own time and the pressures that come with them.

Multi-agency meetings need to take a short amount of time to establish the purpose of each person's involvement and their commitment to supporting children and families. It is important to note that families with children with ALN often see up to ten professionals in any given year to discuss their child's progress (Hodkinson, 2019). It is very important that they know who each of the professionals are and how they are supporting and communicating with other members of the team. It is my role as ALNCo and family liaison to ensure that this is successful. In order to do this successfully, I need to take time to build relationships with families so that they trust that I will build those bridges between professions.

In their research Glenny & Roaf (2008) suggest that successful 'multi-professional' communication provided the best possible support for professionals, children and their families. Through their case studies involving secondary schools and their feeders they recognised that through careful reflection regarding 'feedback loops', professionals were able to ensure that the best quality information was shared at all levels. Through this effective communication they were able to modify approaches and enable them to evolve with the child and their circumstances. In my reflection, this is where I feel that I could make the most amount of progress. As I have stated previously, communication was often limited during my experience and meetings were allowed to be cancelled or postponed leading to a breakdown of understanding on all levels. In the future it will be important to set realistic time scales for meetings to ensure the participation of all staff and make these a priority that cannot be changed.

Kolb's reflective cycle has given me the opportunity to reflect on and analyse my initial experience and use this to support and further my day to day practice. I now have new 'concrete experiences' on which to reflect in a similar way thus continuing the cycle. Through undertaking this reflection, I agree with Kolb that experience is at the heart of learning and developing new skills (Kolb, 1984) which supports the focus of the new curriculum in Wales which is to extend and promote learners' wider experiences so that the curriculum is rich and varied as well as being inclusive (Welsh Government, 2020).

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