

Inclusive leadership: working together to support families

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Inclusive leadership: working together to support families.

Inclusive leadership Should allow people to live freely and work collaboratively toward shared outcomes that respect and reflect the uniqueness and value of the experience of all people, including those who are not largely represented by society because of their differences.

Ferdman (2017) writes that, inclusion is an intentional process in which people and groups understand and respect diversity as a resource, rather than trying to encourage everyone to conform to the norms of the cultural majority, therefore, inclusive leadership should dismantle systems that normalise oppression and promote the benefits of inclusion on the future of our children, ensuring that marginalised people have agency within the settings being led. Ainscow (2020) reports that international commitments to inclusive policy has the benefit of creating a welcoming, anti-discriminatory environment which improves the cost efficiency of the education system by serving all children to the highest standard of education by creating the ideal learning conditions for all learners. Leadership at all levels is essential in ensuring that objectives, and guidelines pertaining to inclusion are implemented in everyday interactions and whole school conduct (Prime, 2020).

In the following Case Study, possible avenues for Inclusive Leadership will be explored in relation to reality of one family who have a child attending a primary school in Wales.

Case Study.

‘A three year old boy (H) joined the school last year, he and his family had moved to the area fleeing Iran as refugees. Both parents speak Arabic and are currently learning to speak English as an additional language, as the move to an English speaking country was not a choice they were able to plan for. The children, also speak Arabic and have little understanding of English at present.

Child H is a happy child who enjoys playing alone and alongside other children, primarily in the outdoor area or with construction toys. H has two close relationships with friends who he enjoys playing with socially.

H has picked up the routine well and has been making progress across all areas of development, picking up English vocabulary slowly but steadily while in Nursery.

Since entering Reception in September, H has been grouped with the lower ability children to work but is unwilling to engage with the new teacher and teaching assistant and his wellbeing in the classroom is being affected negatively, he no longer wants to separate from mum in the morning and seems to withdraw during lesson time.

The issue was raised to parents at parents evening, but the language barrier made it difficult to explain and the dad responded negatively towards the teacher, explaining that he is "a very smart boy."

Recently, H has been turning up to school looking tired, in outgrown clothes that often do not meet uniform expectations.

He also does not bring a snack and his lunchbox usually contains a small amount of food that does not satisfy H.

Mum has been given forms for breakfast club and an application for Free school Meals that have not made it back to the school.

Lunchtime staff and the teaching assistant have both reported these issues to the class teacher who feels unsafe bringing up the issues with the family as she finds the dad intimidating, so now these concerns have been raised with the Head teacher.'

Inclusive leadership will be essential to get to the centre of the issues being faced by H, his family and those he interacts with in school. Cureton (2020) explains that migration-related trauma can make the acclimatisation into the new systems and culture uniquely stressful, and the support and guidance offered to schools is poor. There is a language barrier that is making it difficult for the school to ensure H is having his basic needs met, a trauma informed approach to working with families will be essential in negating the associated challenges so this family, and the school can move forward with the understanding that they all want what is best for that family to help their child to thrive in their new school.

Welsh Government (2017) would categorise this family as a priority because of their refugee status and as such, are entitled to extra support to prevent adverse childhood experiences and prevent cycles of adversity, which can result in successive generations suffering poor health outcomes and antisocial behaviour. Booysen (2014) recommends a respectful,

relational approach that preserves individuality and authenticity while empowering people to be fully engaged and committed to shared goals for the benefit of those affected by diversity, and the community they are now a part of as a way to do intervene with cycles of adversity. Leaders should provide sympathetic, trauma informed responses to parents from these priority groups and work with them to prevent adverse childhood experiences affecting their children. Leaders must be aware of the wider socio-economic contexts of the families they support, and be mindful not to let personal bias affect decision making, i.e. unintentionally attaching stigma to their situation (Welsh Government, 2021).

Leaders need to reach out to the local authority to provide an interpreter to advise and support communication, Leadership teams can apply for specific funding to provide resources for these families via The Minority Ethnic Achievement Services, such as a bilingual Teaching assistant, training for staff, The MEAS found that there is a strong correlation between the acquisition of language and academic achievement in school and senior management who recognise and support this are in a prime position to make a positive impact on the lives of the EAL learners by providing early intervention (Welsh Government, 2015).

In the meantime, explore technology in order to get important information about financial support that could be accessed to help the family overcome financial difficulties that they may be facing (Welsh Government, 2018). The education inspectorate Estyn (2018) praises strategies that assess and support children who have EAL early, as they have also found that the development of the language is easier the earlier the support is implemented which leads to increased confidence and competency in these children's futures.

Leaders should promote and normalise school uniform recycling programmes and encourage all families to use this service, to lesson the stigma of being seen to need to use such a service, Waight, (2017) notes the benefits of a sharing practice as beneficial to many aspects of society, reusing school uniforms will reduce consumption and waste, develop kinship and an appreciation of objects that may get a 'second life', this is a practice that upholds the values leaders will be working towards as part of the new curriculum (Welsh Government, 2018).

Cultural misunderstanding Durante and Fiske cite the ways in which social class affects people's perceptions, people who are deemed 'lower class' are considered less competent,

lazy and unlikely to achieve in life, and people perceived as 'higher class' are deemed cold, but more likely to attain a certain degree of success, like a position as a school teacher, this is a barrier to forming a positive relationship that needs to be acknowledged. Ferdman (2017) tells us that we must be ready to leave our comfort zones and be ready to change our own patterns of behaviour in order to problem solve inclusively, Shutts et al (2017) discuss how, due to the cycle of deprivations affecting people with minority status, very young children begin to identify these people as lower class, and embodying the characteristics of that perceived class which will perpetuate negative stereotypes as they become ingrained as unconscious bias.

An inclusive culture in the setting can soften and undo this by showing people in a light that best represents them, as individuals from a culture who has much to share with others (Morgan, 2024). The new curriculum for Wales requires schools to embed the unique cultural characteristics of Welsh history and heritage (Welsh Government, 2013) school staff need to understand that immigration has a huge part to play in the cultural past, present and future of Wales and work towards reflecting that in their curriculum design.

With regards to the class teacher, their ability to address the needs of marginalised families is being hindered by her experience and leaders should respond to this by delivering a quality sensitivity training programme that will help broaden their understanding to build a positive relationship with this family and be able to provide them with what they need. The leadership team needs to have the courage to address there may be biased attitudes among their staff and make continued efforts to challenge negative attitudes and promote, healthier positive ones.

Berry (2016) observes the role of policies supporting multiculturalism, to break down discriminatory attitudes and allow for mutual acceptance between cultural groups to develop, by allowing the groups opportunities to share cultural expressions and remove any barriers to participation in the community we are aiming to create. The Inclusion guidance refers to section 10 of the Education Act (1996) and section 60 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) to set out guidance for Leaders to use to develop useful policies that promote inclusive practice, training and professional development are listed as strategies to achieve this (Welsh Government, 2018).

Cheng *et al* (2019) state that diversity training can often be counterproductive, and cite

reasons such as the training taking place in one day, bombarding people with negative information and making the attendees feel like they are being punished which causes a backlash, a view which is supported by Royall, McCarthy and Miller (2022) who also acknowledge how diversity training can undermine efforts made towards an inclusive environment. They suggest that negative attitudes and behaviours will be adopted as the norm in an environment that treats them as acceptable, leadership will need to actively promote an anti-discriminatory culture where the norm is to challenge problematic behaviours and inclusive culture is fostered.

A shared mission with a consistent, adaptable approach, a passive approach to equality and diversity, i.e. the companies written policy and tip toing around issues to avoid conflict allows unconscious bias to become a real problem for children and families who are marginalised by society (Moon & Christensen, 2020). Their differences must be acknowledged and provided for in order to be respected.

Sobel, O'Leary, and Kientz (2015) imbue inclusive play as a device that creates educational opportunities to challenge stereotypes, develop social skills and empathy while promoting strong friendships among diverse groups of learners, a view that is supported by Learning Links (2024) cite inclusive play as a positive activity to foster respect, social skills and creativity in all children.

Staff role modelling inclusive play at this early stage of development will consequently instil the idea that children of diverse backgrounds deserve the same opportunities as everyone else and their ideas and values are valuable and interesting (National Council Of Social Service, 2021).

Irvin (2017) states that the skills that children develop through play develop into essential skills used not only throughout childhood, but also into adulthood, therefore,

H's choice of play should be viewed as a beneficial tool to help him develop his language skills, Leaders should ensure that his teachers planning reflected his needs instead of allowing him to fail in an assigned group assembled to support children with a different set of learning needs.

H's interest in building and construction toys, means that teaching staff have a foundation to build on in order to support his learning through differentiation of the curriculum and

enrichment of the environment to support H's development across all area's in a way that hurdles the language barrier and will help him build his vocabulary through play.

H's social needs at school, class structure needs to be addressed in order for him to feel happy and secure. Faas, Wu, and Geiger, (2017) describes early years settings as environments that replicate knowledge, identity and culture, through play, learning and social integration, if we view this idea through the lens of the new curriculums learning Pathways

- Belonging.
- Communication.
- Exploration.
- Physical development.
- Well-being. (National Day Nurseries Association, No date)

We can find ways to met H's learning needs in a way that supports his holistic wellbeing. Removing him from his support network to be taught at a table with children that need support with cognitive difficulties is hindering his sense of belonging by taking him away from his friends who he feels safe and valued by, H is able to communicate well through play, this pathway has also been closed to him by the current class structure, this formal teaching method prevents him from exploration of his environment and being sat at the desk for extended periods does little for his physical development where his engagement with construction toys has allowed him to develop his gross and fine motor skills and core strength, which will prepare him for extended written work when he is developmentally ready for it, Sutapa, *et al.* (2021) studied the benefits of goal orientated gross motor play, similar to the play H engages with in the construction area, noting that this play requires children to problem solve sequentially play offers opportunities to develop key skills across several developmental domains such as social physical, intellectual, and communication/language development, the leadership has to stand firm in its commitment to the new curriculum and remind the class teacher, that H has autonomy over his own learning and chosen the method of learning that best fits his individual needs.

Danniels and Pyle (2023) refer to teachers who practice effective play based curriculum as enactors who support children to cultivate their learning through a balance of child initiated free play and adult guidance, facilitating meaningful play will allow children to make authentic

connections in their learning, keeping them engaged and continually developing their knowledge and skills in the way that is developmentally appropriate for each individual child.

An effective leader should recognise that promoting diversity and inclusion in the setting will benefit everyone who belongs to the educational community, every person is unique and the experiences, talents and characters of these individuals creates a rich culture of diverse skills and abilities that will drive society forward in a positive fashion, so everyone can co-exist peacefully in a community that is promotes empathy, compassion and community spirit.

Policy that enables inclusive Leadership.

Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) is a law unique to Wales that specifically protects future generations.

The legislation requires public bodies to create a more sustainable Wales by committing to a course of action that works towards seven well-being goals.

1. A prosperous Wales
2. A resilient Wales
3. A healthier Wales
4. A more equal Wales
5. A Wales of more cohesive communities
6. A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language
7. A globally responsible Wales

Since the New Curriculum for Wales was introduced, schools throughout Wales have been creating and implementing their own curriculum to support every child so they are able to realise their full potential (Welsh Government, 2024). This means teachers have a unique opportunity to meet the goal of **‘A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language’** and celebrate the diverse cultures of the school community that contribute to Welsh culture as a whole.

Environmental inequality affects families considered a priority due to low income status more than other income bracket families, Children growing up in low income areas are more likely to experience the adverse effects of poor air quality, lack of access to green spaces and subsequent experiential learning and development opportunities (National Children’s Bureau) the policies commitment to **‘A globally responsible Wales’** will improve environmental factors that affect these families, who The Marmot review found to be disproportionately families from ‘ethnic backgrounds’ who are more likely to live in poverty, this puts them at greater risk of societal exclusion that leaders must be aware of and plan to

tackle through implementation of the wellbeing Wales act (Health.org, 2020), even so, Gomez and Bernet (2019) make a clear case for the importance of inclusion in the workplace, improved health outcomes, wellbeing, productivity and the subsequent revenue from that are all positive effects of diversity led management styles, Inclusive practice is an efficient way to achieve the aim of '**A prosperous Wales**'.

One of this policies aims specifically targets inequality, working towards '**A More Equal Wales**' creates a society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstance.

Accessibility is important to promote belonging, having physical features of a building to ensure people of all abilities can use the space is important to make the place feel it is for everyone, but Leadership teams in charge of enacting policy should also consider how accessible the staff are to learners, particularly those who have grown up in a very different culture to the majority culture of the setting they are joining, the lack of familiarity can cause a barrier to belonging, leaving the child feeling insecure and unwelcome which will negatively affect their self esteem preventing them from achieving their full potential.

During the hiring process, the value of a diverse teaching staff should be considered as part of developing a positive culture that prepares all children to be part of a global community where difference is appreciated and respected, as well as bridging the gap for learners from ethnic backgrounds, or those with disability or additional learning needs.

Derin (2023) lists the benefits of employing staff from marginalised groups as, a way to encourage redistribution of opportunities that better represents a range of difference, for those groups to represent themselves in decision-making processes that affect the educational outcomes of all children and to value diversity by allowing them to take the roles and be visible members of the faculty.

Seeing role models encompassing the range of identities they will encounter throughout their lives can help foster empathy, connection and acceptance needed to have a wholly inclusive community.

The new curriculum states that Belonging is a developmental pathway and meeting this developmental pathway means we are building '**A Wales of more cohesive communities**'

The children more likely to feel excluded in schools and care settings are likely to be from Priority family. In many facets of life, such as employment, involvement, education, and

health, groups with protected characteristics continue to face discrimination which can result in the children from these families suffering Adverse childhood experiences.

Early intervention can prevent adverse childhood effects from becoming more substantial issue in the lives of the future generations of these families, which is why inclusive leadership is so important in the Early years. Families First guidance (2019) informs us that building relationships with families can promote positive parenting relationships, these could be strengthened within the school community if inclusion is at the forefront of leader's commitment to this policy and create '**A resilient Wales**'.

Together, families and childcare settings can build enriching environments using elements of each other's culture and experience to enhance and build the community we share and connect meaningfully with one another.

This Policy has faced challenges, such as increasing diversity among decision-makers along with ensuring that Welsh organisations take preventative, integrated approaches to ending poverty and reducing inequality.

The Senedd committee found that the cultures have not changed enough to align their principles with those of the act, and that a lack of funding meant that not enough awareness or understanding of how to do this had been reached, however, the Welsh Government states that finance should not cause a barrier to implementation of the act (Senedd, 2021).

Scanlon and Johnson (2020) argue that building inclusive schools means approaching leadership from a holistic standpoint that appreciates the diversity of the families it supports.

In the same way the act recognises that the broader societal factors contribute to the development of young children into healthy, resilient contributors of society, understanding the circumstances a family lives in can dictate the type of differentiation made to that child's care in the setting, and the actions taken by the schools leadership team to ensure that that child's needs are met, and by ensuring the family are considered, that child's main source of care and education will be a strong foundation for future learning and development, which Bakken, Brown, and Downing (2017) points out is related to the future success of children.

Environmental issues also pose a more direct impact on children's mental health too, anxiety and fear surrounding the issue is common and should be considered, Treichel (2020) states children are not passive victims of the climate crisis, although they will be disproportionately

affected by this issue, giving them agency and showing them the difference their actions can make on their environment can help them build resilience in an increasingly unstable world. Leadership teams engaging with the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act* must ensure a child centred response to work towards a healthier physical and emotional state for the children they serve (Children in a Changing Climate, 2015).

Blog- Making space for diversity to thrive in the Early Years.

To create a wholly inclusive culture in schools and early years settings, leadership teams must recognise the limits of policy alone in achieving this.

Until there is a problem, even the most robust and detailed written policy can remain a basic box ticking exercise without the right culture and attitude to make it meaningful in practice (Royall, McCarthy, and Miller, 2022).

A whole school approach to recognising, understanding and valuing the rich and diverse backgrounds of the family it serves will be key in creating a school community that celebrates and benefits from the myriad experiences and perspectives of its members.

The Education Endowment Foundation (2024) speaks of 'microsystems' within the school community, leaders who are passionate and vigilant about promoting belonging within the setting will be aware of these and seek to develop a shared vision with each of them, by understanding their uniqueness and finding ways to encourage the development and sharing of these characteristics in a way that lets people in these microsystems feel they are safe to exist as themselves and supported enough to collaborate with projects that their knowledge and expertise, the new curriculum places such importance on this philosophy, that they require practitioners to promote 'Cynefin' – a sense of belonging derived from a connection between our identity and our surroundings- in settings, which is the idea (Welsh Government, 2022).

Naturally, there will be barriers that need to be removed in order to get the ball rolling, but the right attitude, it is possible!

The issue of class in our society is taboo, but very real, Durante and Fiske (2017) describe how Cross-class encounters may confirm and reinforce mutual stereotypes, but this can be overridden by constructive contact. Leaders who are mindful of these issues can ensure there is space for all voices to be heard by celebrating skills from people of all backgrounds.

Proactive, collaborative initiatives involving the families attending schools and settings is recommended by the Welsh Government (2018) as best practice for promoting inclusion. Volunteer opportunities could be used as a strategy to act as a bridge between families and schools, asking parents directly to join and share their skills as part of a community learning objective would meet this recommendation, assembling a committee of parents to plan ongoing events like family fun days or tackling a shared project that would require the continued involvement of families, for example, a community garden that teachers could personally invite families to be part of. Brightwheel (2024) suggests this could enhance the sense of community and reinforce channels of communication that will be beneficial to families, teachers and the children they both care for.

Perhaps a parent has artistic skills that could lend themselves to an outdoor mural, some may have woodwork experience that could help to make planters, some may have knowledge of plants and have ideas about what to plant that could become part of a recipe when harvesting that they would like to share with their new community. This ongoing process could make a positive difference in the lives of children and families from a diverse background by developing that reciprocal relationship between the cultures and communities that come together in the early years environment that will have a positive influence on everyone involved.

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