

Catalytic Leadership: Portfolio

Section 1:

A catalyst is defined as an event or person that causes a significant change, according to Cambridge Dictionary (2023), which therefore relates to a catalytic leader, implying that they are an agent of change. Fenlon (2019) highlights that the term leadership is often discussed, however it is not fully understood, he states that there is a significant difference between management and leadership, which is where the term catalytic leader comes into effect. Moreover, McDowall Clark (2012) explains that leadership is not about control, and effective outcomes can be achieved through a catalytic leaders influence, suggesting that they will make change through small progressive steps. Parker (2020) acknowledges how a catalytic leader works in partnership with those around them, such as parents, fellow practitioners and also the children rather than above them. Further supporting this viewpoint, Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) acknowledge that in order to ensure there is long term quality within an early years setting the leaders and practitioners need to be committed and working together to achieve their end goal.

Some viewpoints suggest that a leader is someone who is at the top of a hierarchy as Emeritus (2022) states, however, recent evidence suggests that the term is deeper than this ideology, as Heikkinen, Ahtiainen and Fonsen (2022) agree. Through research, they discovered that working together in a collaborative group which a catalytic leader would enable, promotes the best possible outcome for the children, alongside improving the teams self-esteem and making them feel worthy. This suggests that the traditional idea of a leader may be dated, as Hunt and Fedynich (2019) suggest. Furthermore, Khoshhal and Guraya (2016) acknowledge that it may be time to move away from formal leadership styles and concepts, as they often do not produce fellow leaders, suggesting it is ineffective style. McDowall and Murray (2012) delves deeper into this hypothesis, agreeing that the term leadership within the early years needs to be reconceptualized, since evidence suggests the best outcomes for children occur when a collective group of professionals work with one and other, as McKernan, Church and Taylor (2011) agree.

Therefore, there is a general conclusion that the view a traditional leader is an individual in a position of power is significantly outdated, as Robinson (2017) states. This suggests that being a leader is not about being at the top of a hierarchy or chain of command, and implies anyone can be an effective leader. Supporting this, Rood (2013) recognises that all practitioners within the early years have the capability to be a catalytic leader, as they are continuously making informed decisions with others best interests in mind throughout the day. Early years practitioners hold influence over the children, parents and also the other practitioners, as Murray (2015) conveys, this suggests that early years practitioners are catalytic leaders, as they are an individual who thinks and also acts beyond their immediate role whilst including everyone in the setting, as Toomer, *et al* (2018) states.

Moreover, within an early years settings, practitioners can be defined as catalytic leaders, as Davis, Krieg and Smith (2015) agree, they state that a leader is an individual who creates opportunities for them around them. This relates to the early years as according to Langston and Doherty (2013) a

significant aspect of an early years practitioner role is to observe the children in their care, and act on this by creating further opportunities to aid their development. Supporting this, Northouse (2011) states that an effective leader within the early years will utilise their knowledge of the setting, child development and also their personal attributes to achieve the best possible outcome. Thus, therefore suggests that they are catalytic leaders as they hold the same attributes.

Ang (2012) discusses how research demonstrates that the quality of early years provision is directly linked to the quality of leadership within the setting, the results conveyed that the overall quality of the setting is improved when good quality leadership is being implemented. This will consequently have a good impact on the environment and also those within the setting, as according to Vidman and Stromberg (2021) a considerate leader who considers their team members is significant in improving the practitioners feelings towards the setting, as well as influencing the workplaces morale. Consequently, this will affect the quality of the setting and the outcomes for the children, as O'Sullivan (2009) agrees, suggesting that a catalytic leader is beneficial to practitioners and the children within the setting, as they are able to promote and achieve high-quality outcomes.

There are multiple sociological factors which will have an impact on children and also the opportunities of which they are presented with, such as poverty, discrimination and bullying. According to Davies (2008) these kind of sociological factors will have a detrimental impact on the children, for example children living in poverty often experience difficulties accessing their rights to a service. Supporting this ideology, HM Government (2014) state that children who live in poverty continue the cycle, due to factors such as educational attainment. This suggests that a lack of opportunities for children living in poverty will have a detrimental impact on the individual as they grow throughout life. Moreover, Waldfogel and Garnham (2008) highlight how families in poverty are often unable to access services, such as private childcare settings, which may hinder their development in some cases. Thus, therefore emphasises the need for interventions and services to aid these families, as Butler (2016) states, which a catalytic leader should promote.

An early year practitioner should work with the children and their families to achieve the best possible outcomes, Aubrey and Ward (2013) recognise they early years practitioners should inspire and empower those around them. Therefore, this also relates to being a catalytic leader as Praszkie (2018) suggests that a good leader is an individual who works with their peers in attempt to shape new leaders, which is the role of an early years practitioner, as Ofsted (2022a) agree. This evidence suggests that early years practitioners should inspire change to mitigate the impact of the sociological factors discussed above.

The HM Government (2020) acknowledge that early year practitioners have a role in supporting all children within their setting, and should strive to have arrangements in place to support these children. Toomer, *et al.* (2018) highlights how a catalytic leader also demonstrates these traits and which therefore links the two in practice. Moreover, according to Welsh Government (2015) a catalytic approach within an early years setting will mean change is being created, enabling early year practitioners and their leaders to motivate and empower staff to make a change, as is can improve the

children and their families lives. Additionally, if staff are confident to make change it will create a positive working environment, which will support the setting in improving the sociological demands the children experience.

Adair (2015) acknowledges that discrimination occurs within settings and as a result children often feel isolated and excluded due to this. On the forefront it may appear this discrimination occurs first hand, however some may argue that it is embedded into the curriculum, due to a lack of diversity, as Yoon and Templeton (2022) recognise. However, this viewpoint could be seen as outdated, as within the new curriculum in Wales, the Welsh Government (2021a) pledged to include the learning of black, Asian and minority ethnic histories, suggesting settings are beginning to introduce more diversity in their teaching and planning. Although, on the contrary, according to the Education Workforce Council (2020) in 2019 91.2% of primary school teachers were white, therefore suggesting that whilst diversity is being promoted in the curriculum to mitigate discrimination, there is a lack of role models within settings for the children of an ethnic minority background. Vecchi and Zelinsky (2019) emphasise how these role models are significant in helping children find their social identity and becoming confident in themselves. Therefore, the evidence reviewed suggests that a catalytic leader should strive to empower the wider community whilst involving them with their settings to make all children and also staff feel valued and included, which will consequently help lessen discrimination.

Pacey (2019) acknowledge that inequality and discrimination occurs, however it is an early years practitioners role to help educate and support the next generation, whilst protecting them against discrimination. However, discrimination occurs in early years setting through both staff and also the children if they are being raised in environment with unfair opinions, creating an unsettling and unfair environment, as Savell, *et al.* (2020) recognises. Brown (1998) highlights that children can actively challenge unfairness whilst learning not to discriminate with the correct guidance, from a positive role model, such as a catalytic leader. This, therefore implies that an early years practitioner should be a change agent, for example they could introduce new resources which promote diversity. Supporting this, Kaloti (2010) discovered that the use of diversity dolls helped promote empathy to minority groups and also removed any discrimination or stereotypes. However, this strategy may not be an effective way to make a change due to a lack of funding, as the National Education Union (2019) highlight that there is often not enough additional funding for settings, suggesting they will be unable to update resources.

In conclusion, it is challenging to manage an early years setting whilst promoting and empowering all children and staff, however a catalytic approach is effective as it helps create a more positive setting, whilst also promoting the confidence of staff in raising concerns, queries or opinions. A catalytic approach will help ensure the children are being heard and the setting is continually developing in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for the families, whilst mitigating any barriers which occur due to sociological factors.

Section 2:

The Children Act 2004, implemented the role of a Children's Commissioner and the post was initially created by the *Care Standards Act 2000*, with Peter Clarke being the first Commissioner for Wales, as acknowledged by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2022). Moreover, it was later introduced in other areas, following a recommendation made by Lord Laming in the Victoria Climbié Inquiry, Laming (2003). The Department for Education (2020) acknowledge that the role works on the legislative basis in part 1 and also schedule 1 of the *Children Act 2004*. Furthermore, the Welsh Government (2022a) highlights the role of the Commissioner, stating that they promote children's rights and ensure the child is at the heart of decisions made by the Government.

Rocio Cifuentes is the current Children's Commissioner for Wales, she demonstrates and conveys to people the need for children's rights whilst expressing the significance, as recognised by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2022). Moreover, the primary aims are to safeguard and promote the rights and welfare of children, whilst also ensuring the Welsh Government's policies and legislation benefit the children and young people of Wales, as stated by Towler (2013). Rocio Cifuentes and past Children's Commissioner work in accordance with article 4 of the UNCRC, as outlined by UNICEF (no date), as it states that the Government must ensure and implement children's rights, in order for them to enjoy them. Therefore, this emphasises the role of the Children's Commissioner for Wales, as they are able to aid this and ensure all children are protected.

The Children's Commissioner for Wales is also viewed as a catalytic leader, since she strives for change, as Reed and Canning (2012, cited in Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, 2014, p.103) agrees, they define a catalytic leader as someone who brings change through progressive action. This therefore highlights the requirement for a Children's Commissioner in Wales, as they have a legal duty to promote and also protect the rights of all children, whilst working in agreement with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as recognised by the Children's Commissioner Office (2023).

However, although these are the aim this does not always occur effectively, as recognised by Barrance (2018), as for example, the UNCRC, as recognised in UNICEF (no date) states in article 19 that children should be protected from violence, abuse and also neglect. This is contradiction to recent statistics as in 2019, 4,810 children in Wales were looked after by their local authority since they were at risk of abuse and neglect or have experienced these, as identified by the Office for National Statistics (2020). This suggests that the aims are not being met efficiently. Thomas, *et al.* (2010) highlights that due to the high volume of issues, the Children's Commissioner Office often has to prioritise issues, which may not be seen as equitable as it is difficult to decide which child / issue needs to be resolved first. OECD (2022) supports this viewpoint, as they emphasise how sociological issues will affect children in different ways, depending on their background for example. This therefore suggest that it is unfair to prioritise some issues over others, as preferably all issues should be resolved in accordance with every child's rights. Strengthening this idea, Coles, *et al.* (2016) suggest that in order to improve children's well-being, the Government are required to consider the child's best interests in every possible opportunity, as the UNCRC also acknowledge, as demonstrated by UNICEF (no date).

The Children's Commissioner for Wales (2022) recognise that the Commissioner will review and publish different reports and publications, in order to protect and promote children's rights and welfare. An example of a publication released by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2020) is 'Building Blocks', this was released as a toolkit for practitioners. It has been developed in order to help practitioners identify productive strategies to support learners within their setting, and it is particularly targeted to those children who experience, Social Emotional Behavioural Difficulties, as Welsh Government (2021b) states.

Building Blocks, as released by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2020) emphasises the requirement for the publication, as they discovered an increase in calls from 2018-19 surrounding concerns of isolation and exclusion for children aged 8 and under. Moreover, Mentally Healthy Schools (2020) found that those with ALN, and children who have behavioural and emotional difficulties were more likely to be excluded from school. However, it is argued that this is not an effective management technique and often diminishes a child's self-esteem. Murphy (2021) discovered that children who had been excluded from school feel as though they are misinterpreted, suggesting that often practitioners and teachers do not delve into the deeper problems as to why an individual is behaving in a certain way. Furthermore, Mulvey, Boswell, Zheng (2017) suggests that exclusion can have damaging effects in terms of emotional and behavioural health, educational difficulties, low self-esteem and negative social behaviour. This therefore emphasises the reason Building Blocks was published, in attempt to overcome these issues and prepare practitioners on how to manage the children within their care.

Within the publication it is discussed that local authorities and professional suggest that some children are being taught in isolation due to behavioural issues, such as a reduced timetable, Northamptonshire Council (2018) state that a reduced timetable should only be used as a short measure, and it is where a child is set to be absent from school for part of the day or week. Enquire (2021) agree that a part-time timetable can be used to put in place the additional support necessary. However, they acknowledge that this is not a long-term way of meeting a child's needs, Graham, *et al.* (2019) imply that children are often excluded and placed on a reduced timetable due to their behavioural and emotional difficulties, as there is not enough knowledge or training opportunities. Therefore, a recommendation within the publication is that children with SEBD are included within national planning.

This recommendation could be implemented in early years settings, practitioners should ensure they fully understand their children and also the environment, NSPCC (2022) recognise that in order to achieve effective planning, adults who work with children and young people with ALN or SEBD should all be sufficiently trained, in order to ensure they are fully equipped to manage all children within their settings. Wood, Bornat and Lock (2020) acknowledge that any form of planning which affects the younger generation should be child-centred, whilst keeping in mind all children, therefore agreeing with the recommendation.

However, some argue it may be difficult to introduce one continuous planning which suits all children, as some children may require additional support, such as those with SEBD, as Armstrong and Hallett (2012) suggest. Moreover, Markkanen, Anttila and Valimaki (2019) highlight the lack knowledge and

confidence of practitioners and teachers when managing children with behavioural issues, they suggest that this may make it difficult to incorporate the child's need into planning as they may not know how to engage the individual. This is therefore a barrier to the recommendation, suggesting that a lack of knowledge and confidence may make it difficult to include all children within national planning. On the contrary, training opportunities could help overcome this, as Castro, *et al.* (2020) suggest, they agree that practitioners and teachers should have opportunities to receive appropriate training to understand different behavioural and emotional issues. However, Lawler (2022) recognises that there is not sufficient funding within the early years sector and this can therefore lead to a lack of training, suggesting this may not be an effective option.

Moreover, the publication also recommends that a policy is specifically created to prevent exclusion for children under the age of 8, which is foundation phase ages, this would therefore ensure that all settings are following the same structure. Hallsworth, Parker and Rutter (2011) state that policy making is integral to creating consistency across different organisations, implying that this recommendation would be effective in reducing exclusion. Supporting this viewpoint, Akhal (2019) states that policy making and changes are fundamental within the early years sector to ensure the children are getting the best possible outcome. The recommendation suggests that a new specific policy could help tackle exclusion within the early years sector, strengthening this Ofsted (2022b) recognise that when a policy is created, early years settings have a duty to enforce these effectively, implying it may help overcome the issue. Furthermore, Melhuish (2016) highlights the need for policies within the early years sector, agreeing that it results in a high-quality outcome, suggesting it is also a long-term solution. This evidence indicates that this recommendation could be effective if the policy was implemented effectively within settings.

However, there are also some challenges to enforcing a new policy, as Urzua (2012) identifies, she states challenges include, cultural difference between settings, lack of knowledge surrounding policy objectives and also a lack of training to develop these policies. Further, Eberhart, Hahn and Seybel (2017) suggest that the people creating the policies are often not knowledgeable on the topic, which in this case is exclusion, consequently this suggests that the policies may not be fit for purpose. Supporting this viewpoint, a review by Bonetti and Brown (2018) found gaps in evidence when underpinning early years policies, suggesting there is a lack of knowledge, understanding and evidence when creating these policies. Therefore, this implies that creating a policy specifically targeted towards preventing exclusion for children may be difficult, due to a lack of knowledge surrounding the issue which would consequently result in no change of outcome for these children. Nevertheless, Pacey (2020) emphasis that through consistency and up-to-date training, creating and implementing a new policy can help tackle difficulties within the early years sector, such as exclusion.

Section 3:

The Child Poverty Action Group (2022) state that in 2020-21, 3.9 million children were living in poverty within the UK, which equates to 27% of children. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023) defines poverty as the situation of where an individual's resources are below their minimum needs. Moreover, Action for Children (2022) convey that a child is deemed to be living in relative poverty if they live in a household whose income is below 60% of the average income for that year. Therefore, these statistics and figures highlight the large amount of children living in poverty, which will consequently have a detrimental impact on the child's life, as Public Health Scotland (2021) discuss. Thompson and Ivanson (2020) acknowledge that poverty will affect a number of different factors in a child's life in a negative way, suggesting these children will be at a disadvantage and may also have limited opportunities.

Building upon the information discussed above that poverty will negatively affect a child, as the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2017) also support, Ferguson, Bovaird and Mueller (2007) discovered that children living in poverty obtain lower educational attainment, as well as displaying traits of being less ready for school, than those children who were not living in poverty. The Office for National Statistics (2020) revealed that pupils who were eligible for free school meals, made less progress than those who are not eligible for FSM, this suggests that those children living in poverty make less progress than their peers.

Goodman and Gregg (2010) report that by age 11, only approximately three quarters of children from the disadvantaged, poorest fifth of families reach the Governments expected level at key stage 2, in comparison to a much more significant figure, which is 97% of the richest fifth, thus emphasis a clear link between poverty and a child's educational attainment. However, in attempt to overcome this barrier, the Government have implemented strategies such as free school meals, the Association of UK Dietitians (2017) state that a well fed brain is highly important and will lead to a better learning outcome, as well as aiding children's behaviour. Therefore, this implies that free school meals may attempt to bridge the gap between these attainment statistics.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that poverty in children can also have an impact on a child's mental health, Watkins (2021) discuss how children in poverty will face high levels of stress, and this will therefore transfer to the children, resulting in a detrition in their mental health. They revealed that children from the poorest 20% of households are four times more likely to have a serious mental health difficulties by the age of 11. Yoshikawa, Aber, Beardslee (2012) consider the impacts of poverty on children's mental health, stating that it can make children feel more stressed, anxious and depressed, this may consequently have an impact on their social skills, as NSPCC (2022) acknowledge.

In 1940, the local authorities agreed to provide free nutritious meals for school children, as stated by Finch (2019), further the Welsh Government (2022c) has pledged that all primary school children in Wales will get free school meals by 2024, whilst this currently in action for all nursery aged children. Sunter (2020) consider the advantages and benefits of free school meals, stating that evidence has linked free school meals to improved educational attainment, which is therefore necessary due to the gap of educational attainment between children in poverty and those who are not. Vik, Lippevelde and

Overby (2019) strengthen this viewpoint, agreeing that free school meals improve public health issues, such as mental health, whilst also aiding an individual's holistic health, as the Child Poverty Action Group (2019) agree.

However, it can be argued that free school meals does not promote equity, since the eligibility is strict, the Food Foundation (2022) state that large numbers of children in need are missing out on free school meals, due to the tight eligibility criteria. Yang, *et al.* (2017) recognise that free school meals are an essential strategy implemented by the Government in attempt to mitigate the effects of poverty. However, they concede that a barrier of FSM's is that it is not universal or standardised across the different nations, which consequently leads to unequal access, which is further supported by Hobbs and Vignoles (2010), as they argue that family income may not be the best assessment of eligibility for free school meals.

Another intervention to help support the sociological factor, poverty is Flying Start settings, this is an Early Years programme targeted to families with children under 4 years of age who live in some of the most disadvantaged areas of Wales, as Welsh Government (2017) state. Thomas (2021) highlight benefits of the Flying Start programme, implying that it provides children with childcare which will have an impact on their development, as well as also enhanced health visiting. This will consequently will have a positive effect on the child, as Geoffroy, *et al.* (2010) discovered that children who experienced a childcare setting obtained higher school readiness, aiding their educational opportunities. This, is therefore significant in terms of poverty since Ferguson, Bovaird and Mueller (2007) state children living in poverty show lower traits of school readiness, which is also supported by Watkins (2018) highlighting the benefit of Flying start settings.

On the contrary, Flying Start has been described as a 'postcode lottery' by some, including Miller (2018), since the eligibility for Flying Start is based on where a family lives. Save the Children (2021) state that 45% of children living in income deprivation in Wales are not eligible for Flying start, suggesting the eligibility criteria is not effective although the service is. Moreover, supporting the viewpoint Aber, Morris and Raver (2012) recognise that although there are some trends surrounding poverty, they address that everyone is at risk of poverty and therefore this cannot be completely centred on their postcode. However, evidence from the Welsh Government (2011) highlights the benefits of Flying Start, and the positive impact this has on the children living in poverty, as for example, they emphasises how activities used in Flying Start settings further aid the children's language development. The Welsh Government (2022b) highlight their national mission, as they aim to roll out Flying Start to all. This will therefore make it all equitable to all, as everyone will be able to access this beneficial provision.

Although it can be debated that these services and interventions help support children in poverty, Huston (2012) highlight the importance of early intervention, suggesting that it helps address child poverty and aids their educational journey and development. Molloy (2019) strengthen this viewpoint, as they agree that evidence shows that early intervention can be effective in reducing the impact of poverty on children's development. This therefore highlights the importance of interventions, such as Flying Start, since evidence demonstrates the positive impact they have on the children.

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