

Introduction

The world today is at its most varied in terms of diversity. Within our communities, our working, and family lives, there are heterogeneous characteristics that fashion a society rich in differing identities. Consequently, Ferdman, (2021) emphasises the need to modify individual opinions, beliefs, and values, to surrender our given perceptions of normality and strive for acceptance of diversity.

Agbenyega, & Klibthong, (2022) Agree with authors Eacott, (2016) and Day and Sammons, (2013) that inclusive leaders nurture multiculturalism and boldly stand against presupposed paradigms, employing a workforce inclusive of all backgrounds, cultures, and identities. However, simply filling positions with a more diverse representation of minority groups, does not mean the workforce, or its leadership become inclusive. (Ashikali, Groeneveld, & Kuipers, 2021). Randel, *et al.* (2018) state that in many settings, these individuals are still not being included in the decision-making process and are scarcely able to contribute their diverse knowledge and potential experiences to enhance and drive forward change due to a hierarchy of regimented decision makers.

The inclusive leader that would be a catalyst in an all-embracing world, would equally inspire and encourage others to lead with them. supporting diverse relationships, and objectivity, and compelling humanity regardless of identity, to feel a sense of belonging. (Ferdman, 2020) (Robinson and Perry, 2022) and (Welsh Government, 2022)

Scenario

The scenario given below identifies how inclusive leadership plays a vital role in the early years education and care system, and recognises how, through diverse inclusive collaboration, an effective and innovative approach can be cultivated. However, Theoharis and Scanlan, (2020) state that the success of dealing with any school or settings inclusivity and diversity challenges are threatened if a broader view is not taken into consideration. By this the writers suggest the comprehensive research into the whole socioeconomical context, involving children, family, home life, community, and holistic supporting network, and the personal needs of each child, family unit or situation.

The chosen setting is a reception class within a community school. The child observed within the scenario is five years old and for the sake of anonymity, their name is Eden. All individuals are accountable in the protection of other people's personal information. By law, they are required to adhere to strict policy and seek permission for any information shared in line with the Data Protection Act. (Data Protection Act, 2018) Eden is a bright, engaging child who began nursery in the community school a year and a half earlier. They are ahead of their peers in terms of speech and language development and general academic performance. Eden is a confident contributor within the classroom and thrives on adult engagement and taking on responsibilities. Eden is active and able and loves the outdoors, however, it

is evident that they find it challenging to create and sustain relationships with their peers in class and at play times. Despite maximum encouragement Eden struggles to get involved in play, or build connections with the other children, tending not to be included in group games and activities when staff are not present. The Ripken Foundation, (2016) believes that children who find it challenging to participate in free child-led play, can often be associated with having low self-esteem. Whereas, Wood, (2014) suggests that resisting play and refusing to join in the games created by others can be an active choice for some, to gain situational power over the unknown and maintain elements of control.

Looking closely at Eden's background, Eden entered the school through nurse phase recorded as a female pupil eighteen months previously and was an exceedingly popular newcomer, social and outwardly clever, however, over the course of their time in school, Eden now represents a non-conforming (non-binary) gender fluid minority. Those who chose to identify as non-binary or gender fluid have struggled to find a specific fit to their born gender exclusively. (NEU Cymru, 2019) NSPCC, (2023) state that a child or young person struggling with the reality of challenging 'gender normality' can become a vulnerable target for negative encounters within a school setting. Other people's perceptions, prejudice, and bias attitudes towards diversity can alienate a child and/or their family. Eden's hair is now kept short, and they attend school in attire that fluctuates between and reflects both genders, encouraged by family to wear what they feel comfortable in each day. Article 5 in the UNCRC (Unicef, no date) describes the respect for parents' guidance and decisions regarding their children, particularly when the child begins to evolve and initiates their own preferences, supported by family.

Furthermore, Edens Mother also identifies as non-binary and has more recently developed distinctive facial hair in the form of a beard, this had sadly caused a controversial reaction within the local community, outside of school hours, and had resulted in a group of teenagers questioned and warned by local authorities. It is reported that one person in five, who represents an orientation within LGBTQ+ has become a reported victim of crime in the last 12 months in Britain. (Stonewall, 2023) Furthermore an increase of over 40% in LGBTQ+ hate crimes in Wales from 2020 to 2021. (UK Government, 2022) The family and Eden are known to local Doctors however, they decline the need for support or a referral to CAMHS. Many LGBTQ+ families in the United Kingdom can find health services daunting as they have been subjected to negative experiences, or fear misconception and judgement towards their life choices. (Powell, 2018). There are no health or wellbeing concerns regarding Eden reported to the school and no highlighted needs fed back from multidisciplinary teams within the community. Eden is up to date on all immunisations and effectively attends children's clinic appointments. Also, Eden's attendance at school is positive. No concerns have been identified under Wales Safeguarding Procedures (2021) by any staff members or services working with Eden.

Both parents are committed to Eden's school life but avoid interaction in general with staff. They request a telephone conversation in place of face-to-face parent's consultations and fail to attend any parental engagement sessions and community hub activities. Involvement in school life and having your voice heard as a parent, carer and advocate can be fundamental in establishing firm foundations for inclusivity in education. (United Kingdom Government, no date) (Pacey, 2023)

Eden's parents collect them together at the end of each school day, and staff had recently observed negative reactions from other parents/families and children. Watson, and Russell. (2015) cite a study carried out by (GLSEN) which identifies how LGBTQ+ families reported a negative presence of discrimination from parents and other children while at school. This is also supported in research by McDonald and Morgan, (2019) and GLSEN, (2019). The school has only recently become aware of the negative discrimination surrounding the family and staff have concerns that this could be affecting Eden's wellbeing and the family's quality of life. The school feels the need to address the situation. However, this must be handled correctly, respecting people's privacy is an important human right awarded to every person. (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018)

Siraj and Hallet, (2014) suggest that inclusive leadership should harness the skills of individuals and encourage them to take the lead within knowledgeable areas. The school had recently appointed a transgender year 6 teacher, for the sake of this anonymity his name is Mr Lewis. Mr Lewis had come into the setting following 13 years of teaching in the local community comprehensive school, and he underwent his transition from female to male during that time. The leadership team approached Mr Lewis and discussed their concerns, to which he was able to give informed advice, the headmaster appointed a team headed by Mr Lewis to lead the whole school approach. Mr Lewis would take the first steps to reach out to Eden's family, acknowledge that their rights are respected and advise them that there are ways in which the school can not only support but encourage a positive attitude re-educating their staff, pupils, families, and the wider community to engage in inclusive thinking.

From the initial meeting with Eden's parents, it was clear that they desired the same outcomes as the school, and in an emotional session Mr Lewis and the supporting staff were introduced to an adverse battle they had no idea was being fought. Imperatively, it was also disclosed in this meeting, Mum's facial and body hair was the result of a medical condition called Cushing's Syndrome, which is caused by the excessive presence of cortisol levels in the body often induced by long term steroidal treatment. (NHS, 2019) Therefore this was not a 'choice' due to gender preference or lifestyle and the school were now aware of Mum's plight to educate on prejudged opinions. When brought to the attention of the proactive leadership team within the school, it was evident that firstly, training and policy was not up to date addressing the LGBTQ+ minority, therefore failing to uphold inclusive practice, guidance, and legislation. The school's policy needed immediate updating. Regrettably, Paechter, Toft, & Carlile, (2021) point out that new policy is only developed when an issue is

highlighted, or the need arises. This is a critical area to address in schools as its vitally important to safeguard all children, especially those who may be dealing with LGBTQ+ issues internally without the support of adults within the school or at home. All adults working with children in the LGBTQ+ community, must make themselves aware of the challenges and risks these children can face to uphold an effective safeguarding policy. However, in the absence of disclosure, all children should be safeguarded in the same way with acute observation. (NSPCC, 2023) (Wales Safeguarding Procedures, 2021)

While specific legislation in Wales addressing non-binary/gender-fluid minority children is eagerly awaited, the Welsh Government have issued a framework and action plan to support not only the non-binary community but all individuals who fall under the umbrella of LGBTQ+ minorities. These structures are set up to inform policy makers and the public that there is a commitment to establish a route for Welsh children and young people to be protected and safeguarded, while expressing themselves freely and celebrating the right to live life as an individual. (Welsh Government, 2021)

The Headmaster, Mr Lewis, and his team along with Eden and their family began to pick apart school policy and legislation to suit many different situations they were able to foresee. This reflects the work of Ferdman, (2021) who recognises that to gain inclusive progression through leadership, anyone involved within the circumstances, should be encouraged to suggest action which could drive change and maximise outcomes, However, there is potentially a fine line in terms of inclusive and oppressive leadership, when there are lots of people seen to be involved who have no real influence in the end due to controlled decision making. (Groomes, 2023) A plan was put in place for Mr Lewis and his team to look at staff training and appropriate content to deliver to children and families, with assistance from Stonewall, (2021). And Welsh Government, (2021). However, they met many barriers when carrying out a new scheme of training, with unbalanced staff approaches and attitudes, and time constraints which proved to limit opportunities to learn. (Schuelka, 2018) and (Estyn, 2021). Moreover, the pushback from disproving parents had a negative effect on progression and at times became overwhelming for staff to manage. (Glazzard, 2011)

Before 2020 Primary Schools were not obligated to deliver content specific to LGBTQ+ matters. Looking back further, at the Local Government Act 1988, the public advertising of any LGBTQ+ lifestyles within primary schools was not permitted as it was seen as promoting behaviours. While this changed in 2003, many schools are still wary of delivering diverse and inclusive content for fear of negative response. The School Run, (2023). Hierarchical systems in many schools can still present as institutionalised and hold discriminatory characteristics highlighting gender divergence. (Warin, and Adriany. 2017) and (Ammaturo, & Moscati, 2021)

The conveyance to educate children in Primary schools, inclusive of LGBTQ+ matters, is a complex one, but one the Welsh Government claim to feel strongly

about. The relationships and Sexuality Education code (2022) is a legislative code that has been devised and issued to all schools and settings in Wales under section 8 of The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act (2021). The RSE code requires all establishments when designing their curriculum to review and measure content, based on the service users, the environment, and the relative age a phase of the children. (Welsh Assembly Government, 2021) Legislation states that RSE is to be delivered to children through Primary and Secondary settings inclusively in Wales. (Welsh Assembly Government, 2022) Through the RSE programme, the Welsh Government are eager to educate children on Rights, Equality, Sex, Gender, and Sexuality, along with other categories relating to body image, wellbeing, and safety. This code states its content is inclusive of LGBTQ+ relationships.

An example of delivering this code to children within primary classrooms is to teach them how diverse families can be, their values and expectations, and why understanding and fairness is vitally important. (Welsh Assembly Government, 2021). Additionally, Couchi, (2020) Suggests children will often present with opinions on gender unknowingly, because it is 'what they know already,' for example 'only girls can be nurses.' This could be because Mum and all of Mum's female friends are nurses, or 'only boys play football.' Possibly because there are only boys in their home team and the team they support in the premier league. Couchi, (2022) also suggests swapping some traditional story books with books designed to be inclusive, one example is Jessica Love's story, 'Julian is a mermaid.'

Revisiting the scenario, while the RSE sessions had been rolled out within the primary school, the topic of gender non-conformity had not been part of the developing curriculum for 5–6-year-olds. The Headmaster and Mr Lewis sought advice from Stonewall Cymru (2023) and Welsh Government, (2021). They researched and adopted 'The Creating an LGBTQ+ Inclusive Primary Curriculum' (Stonewall, 2022) Beginning to deliver a whole school approach to inclusion. The school started teaching the children about penguins and their roles within the family unit and began to look at topics which promoted thought and questioning. Immediately Eden was playing penguin families with the other 5-year-olds as they were happy to go off to find fish while 'Dad' watched the egg, they began answering questions and being involved in peer conversation, staff reported the change in dynamics almost instantly within the classroom having given the children this new information. According to UNICEF (no date) Article 12 and 13 of UNCRC, children have specific rights to information and to have the freedom to speak and react in whichever way they do.

Stonewall Cymru, (2019) describe the new RSE curriculum as well accepted among parents and professionals in Britain but, in contrasting views, Nash and Brown, (2021) along with Kuhar and Zobec, (2017) write about the ongoing debates and concerns within communities worldwide, where parents are fighting for the rights of their children, who they believe are being subjected to learning about gender concepts within their school curriculum. There are many parents who feel this

education pathway is a damaging and misleading road to chaos and confusion. Anti-gender movements are calling for the ban of all content as they believe it is persuasive and enticing to young children. It is important to note at this point that within the scenario, some families found it difficult to process the new training and educational strategies implemented. However, the school maintained a strict policy and were able to work with these families in turn for resolution. It is important as an establishment and advocate for inclusion, that an anti-discrimination policy is in place and will be upheld regardless of resistance. (Welsh Government, 2021)

Supporting this progression, several parents within the community, volunteered to continue to work with and advocate for families facing discrimination. In turn, Eden's family became part of the local church and were valued for their work in the food bank and homeless shelters run within the area. Being part of a community and feeling a sense of belonging can improve well-being, poor mental health, and encourage the integration of a multicultural way of life. (McNamara, *et al.* 2021).

From the beginning it was evidenced that the school leadership approach was inclusive, with professionals, parents and carers, children, and the wider community all taking an autonomous role in a process to develop a more inclusive outcome for Eden and their family, and the future of families who desperately seek acceptance and unity.

Section 2 – What Really Works for the early years? Guidance for the Early Years pupil deprivation grant.

'What really works for the early years?' Is a guide to the most effective way to utilise the Welsh Governments 'Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant' (Welsh Government, 2015)

What is the Early Years Pupils Deprivation Grant?

Children in Welsh communities have been identified as underachieving based on some of their socio-economic factors. Poverty, and deprivation, labels such as 'Looked After children' and children with adverse family backgrounds have been identified as falling behind peers from more prosperous, advantaged families. (Welsh Government, 2015.) Similarly documented by Roos, (2019) and Mackes *et al.* (2020).

In a comparative study, it was discovered that children in receipt of free school meals produced outcomes that were years behind those with supported and comfortable backgrounds. These findings launched the phrase 'attainment gap' which grows with the child from their first moments in a setting through their education journey and sets them apart from other learners based on their developmental outcomes. (Welsh Government, 2015) and (Dunatchik, *et al.* 2018) agreeing that, socio-economic inequities before the age of 5 are more likely to influence and affect gaps in outcomes, especially when relating to adverse childhood experiences. (Hardcastle, *et al.* 2018)

The grant awarded to pupils faced with deprivation is given for the purpose of cultivating improved results, tackling known barriers, and enabling children and families who are disadvantaged, to set and attain targets that will enhance their future development. (Welsh Government, 2015) On top of this, the guidance also emphasises how the grant supports family engagement by distributing funding for groups in the early years that encourage parents and carers to become learners and participate in activities with their children. Additionally, the guidance states that the grant is fundamental in providing opportunities to link with multi-disciplinary community services and allows access for support and encouragement in times of need. (Welsh Government, 2015) In spite of this, Action for Children, (2021) claim that accessing early years children's services is still in great need of government backing. They identified through a survey of 2000 families, that over 80 percent had struggled to access much needed support services in their local area. This was due to unavailable space, narrow requirements, and funding. Furthermore, Ainscow, *et al.* (2016) describes similar barriers when accessing services, linking groups with characteristics based upon ethnicity, culture, gender, and status.

According to the guide and government grant, the early years setting can receive up to £300 per child per year under this scheme to tackle some of these barriers preventing increased positive outcomes. However, in a final evaluation report of the PDG in Wales published in 2017, it was noted that while success and improved outcomes were evident within settings, many had personally invested in closing the attainment gap, so information relating to how the grant specifically changed outcomes was then inconsistent and at risk of results being biased and highlighting different levels of affluence and private input. Pye, *et al.* (2017)

The guidance recognises how children grow and develop at the hands of an intricate and complex structure involving family, community, and education. Linking back to the similar theoretical works of Bronfenbrenner, explained in depth by Saracho, and Evans. (2021)

The guidance depicts that leadership, along with continuing professional development is key to best practice to successfully meet and exceed targets set within the frameworks and curriculum of the early years. Inclusive leadership being a central tool when confronting barriers linked especially to deprivation. Coleman, Sharp, & Handscomb, (2016) Describe the success an all-inclusive leadership approach can have in the education and care of children, identifying attributes such as; staff motivation, collaboration, individual CPD opportunities and a commitment to continuing reflective practice. The guide demonstrates how combining a co-constructed workplace with an inclusive approach to learning can be valuable when facing barriers such as poverty. Contrary to this depiction, reports are still evidencing a general crisis as staff morale in the Early Years is at an all-time low, where staff are left feeling undervalued and unqualified which in turn creates its own barriers. (Early Years Workforce Commission, 2021)

Inclusive leadership is again promoted in the guide by suggesting the alliance of multidisciplinary services, working together to lead children into areas of enhanced development. (Welsh Government, 2015). To get the most from the early year's pupil deprivation grant, the guide encourages its input in the following areas of success criteria.

Facilitators must observe and record children coming into their settings. They may or may not be at the level of identifying letters and numbers, they will look at the level of social skills and the child's ongoing emotional developmental needs. Can the child engage in activities, sit, and listen, socialise with other children, understand basic instruction, and how is the child's overall demeanour? The difficulty in observing children at the start of their care and education journey comes when transition barriers affect overall behaviours. There must be a settling in period before any decisions are made regarding assessment and progression. (Pacey, 2021) and (Early Years Outdoor Learning, 2018) Initial observations can be flawed if this is not given consideration.

The grant can help to build relationships with the home and family unit, provide proactive parent engagement and adult learning opportunities. Enable access to community services and supply tools for successful learning at home with their child, monitored by parent feedback and follow up. Parental feedback can critically inform inclusive leadership by equipping leaders with all points of view from all areas, to aim for an unbiased and universal approach for decision making. (Carter, and Abawi, 2018)

Improving CPD for all staff is a topic of obvious importance in terms of quality service and best practice, however, professional development barriers control how much training employees can access. Funding and time are seen as the two most oppressing barriers in training staff in the Early Years. (Social Mobility Commission, 2020) The guide advocates productive use of all capable staff including Teaching Assistants and LSA's, volunteers and students. The Welsh Government writes that inclusive leadership comes from using all staff effectively, however, according to the National Centre for Social Research, (2020) Early Years staff are still feeling like they are not given a voice, even though they are the main facilitators and educators in the setting. Finally, the guide suggests that the monitoring of pedagogy, setting to setting, critical analysis, and working collaboratively with other schools in the area, can make grants go further and pool resources, leaning on and effectively utilising multiagency teams such as Flying Start and Communities First to increase levels of support and access to more knowledgeable others. This will only strengthen the approach to develop with the funding, inclusively leading change within the early year's workforce. (Welsh Government, 2021)

Section 3

'Curiosity to learn'

Following covid, the complex world of children's needs can seem overwhelming to manage within a setting. Children's mental health and wellbeing has been drastically affected during the pandemic's lockdowns, with the strict, sometimes scary statistics on the news taking over our lives and informing our decisions. (Walton, 2021)

Classroom behaviour is becoming too much for some members of staff, Welsh Government, (2012) encourages staff to set clear boundaries with consequences to support behaviour management, additionally and more importantly, to always question the root of the behaviour. The expectation to take charge and support our children's arising mental health and inclusion needs put pressure on our service consistently. Because of this, as facilitators, we find ourselves facing situations daily that we are unprepared for, situations that challenge our advocacy skills, even with the most supportive leadership teams behind us there are limitations in what we can do with the tools we have been given. It is easy to blame lack of knowledge on the barriers that take us away from professional development. Time, staffing and support. Workload, funding, and appropriate content were the top three barriers reported by staff when questioned regarding access to CPD. (Broad, 2015) While these constraints do limit our access to enhanced learning, are we using them as an excuse to claim ignorance?

Let us look at this from an inclusive leadership perspective, to be a successful inclusive leader is to empower those around us to lead with us. (Javed, et al. 2019). To empower is to encourage and therefore motivate opportunity for growth and development. So, what if within the early years, we as practitioners became curious to learn? Curious to develop our own knowledge to support and then empower others. Committed to understanding strong cultural and diverse minorities, taboo LGBTQ+ complexities, reasoning behind behaviour patterns, and guarded community histories. What if we took learning personally, like we do when looking for answers regarding our own families or concerns.

As early years facilitators we nurture innovation and critical thinking, take the 'Awe and Wonder' process. What does this mean? how did it come to be? What happens when I do this? All questions we encourage our children to ask. All questions innately built in our minds. (Thomson, 2016)

The next time you sit with a child of ethnic minority, aim to have learned something personal to them to discuss, the next time you meet with your LGBTQ+ parents, ask them to elaborate on findings you have come across. The next time a child cries for no reason, use guided techniques to calm and ease concerns. Find the information to include these individuals and families and allow them to feel your investment in them.

As a care giver or educator at any level, inclusive leadership techniques can ultimately change how a person feels about and sees themselves, if you can bring positive change through your own curiosity and action, and if you can provoke personal investment in others, you are a catalytic inclusive leader within the early years system.

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