

Inclusive leadership – working together to support families

Section 1

The first aspect to note is that Inclusive leadership requires a strong understanding for creating opportunities that benefit and enhance all types of diverse backgrounds and cultures for it to be effective, allowing everyone to be their best and feel valued in a safe and engaging environment (Ferdman, 2021, p. 3). Additionally, according to the Inclusive leadership handbook, the approach of an inclusive leader should invite and appreciate all views from individuals and encourage their full participation, which aims to invite changes and create innovation. In addition, an inclusive leader recognise fundamental human rights and value these along with being sensitive to others. Indeed, able to make conscious efforts to remove barriers for individuals at risk of discrimination. Inclusive leaders are aware of avoiding a hierarchical approach to these matters and encourage the involvement from communities, professionals and families (International Childhood Education, (no date).

Furthermore, Randel et al, (2018) highlights how leaders need to include other team members in all decisions and discussions that are being made. This allows their voices to be heard that can acknowledge different perceptions. Notably, Nishi and Mayer, (2009) and Shore et al, (2011) examined how high-quality leaders can promote and improve reciprocal discussions amongst individual team members that provides a true sense of inclusion. Both agree and can identify inclusive leadership to revolve around the behaviours towards members of staff own needs and sense of belonging within a work environment (Randel et al, 2018). Moreover, (Ferdman, 2018, p. 3-4) agrees, stating that those holding a position of responsibility should seek the perspectives of other colleagues and integrate these views into practice. According to Agbenyega and Klibthong, (2022) when leaders focus on the views and voices of the early year's practitioner it can help with understanding how inclusive practice is implemented within the setting for young children. However, a study conducted by Sawaddemongkol et al. (2017) found that when settings are managed in a hierarchical way where there are positions of superior and inferior, this impacts the work environment that becomes unsecure inhibiting an inclusive service. Still, leadership is complex, and through research it has provided a better understanding of what this role requires in practice.

However, an alternative view of hierarchical leadership is becoming more of collaborative working rather than independent that can develop a shared vision. The importance of this working in an early year's setting provides practitioners with the confidence and commitment that enables them to give the best of their qualities where they feel trusted and motivated (Siraj and Hallet, 2016, p. 17). Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton, (2013, p. 4.) highlight that all

practitioners need to think of their own opinion on what it is to be inclusive within their practice, and ongoing professional support towards these understandings are essential. Indeed, when practitioners take an interest and are encouraged to develop their knowledge this forms part of being inclusive.

Scenario

For the purpose of this scenario the 2 year old boy will be named Charlie

Charlie is 2 years old, he started flying start setting 6 weeks ago and has settled well in his first term. Charlie and his parents have lived in the area for 6months. During half term mum had a baby and since returning dad has been dropping off and collecting Charlie, where it would usually be mum. Staff have noticed how unsettled Charlie is since returning and is hitting out at staff and other children and demanding constant attention from staff. The leader of the setting has raised this with dad to make him aware. After the second week dad has now returned to work and mum is now bringing Charlie again, however his attendance has dropped and when staff phone, mum states she had struggled to get both children ready in time or they have had a sleepless night. When Charlie does come in, he is upset leaving mum and unsettled during the session. Staff usually do not have a chance to speak with mum as she hurries off quickly when she picks up. One day on drop off the setting leader manages to catch mum to reassure her and attempt to let her know how Charlie has been recently. This is when mum starts to cry explaining she is feeling overwhelmed with everything and finding it hard to cope. The leader invites Mum inside where she is given the opportunity to talk further in a private room.

Firstly, it can be noted that the approach taken towards the mum by the setting leader in the first instance by offering a safe space to talk and taking the time to listen was showing compassion and understanding. Mum felt comfortable enough to accept the invitation to go inside to talk with the staff.

Each day, with all staff members the setting leader tries to be visible at the door, greeting parents with a hello and a smile. This allows all parents to recognise who she is and, in an effort, to create a comfortable environment for parents to be able to approach staff with ease. However, this can sometimes be challenging for some parents who find it difficult to engage (Wilson, 2016, p. 69). Compared with Charlie's mother she had not had much time to build relationships with staff yet, that allowed her the opportunity to open up about the difficulties she had been experiencing since having a new baby. Nevertheless, Brown *et al*, 2012, p. 41 cited in Wilson, 2016, p. 106) parents who do wish to disclose their concerns are usually drawn to certain professionals, and it is usually professionals from a favoured setting that are important conduits for early identification. Similarly, Nutbrown and Clough, (2013) point out these parent partnerships can be developed, but unless maintained by practitioners that show a genuine interest in their needs through regular engagement, it will not encourage parents to feel comfortable enough to talk.

Being part of flying start, entitles charlie's mum access to other services such as parenting and enhanced health visiting that support and influence the outcomes for children, and this is more likely when parents can provide positive care. All support put in place for parents should reflect what is set out in the UNCRC for the rights of the child (Welsh government, 2017). The idea of a joined up working approach acknowledges the interrelatedness of child and family needs in the different fields that make these services more responsive and flexible for families. Furthermore, it allows specialist help and inclusion of mental health support (Anning, 2010).

However, all families have different needs when it comes to support, and it is for the leader to explore this with Charlie's mum to access the right services for the family. This can be achieved through listening and encouraging effective participation that ensures a parent' have a central role (Nutbrown and Clough, 2014, p. 158). It was Bronfenbrenner's findings that underpinned programmes such as flying start, which involved tackling difficulties being faced by families that can ensure children's development and well-being is not affected, and that it should always involve parents to ensure inclusivity (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Moreover, if leaders are not aware or do not fully understand what the risk factors are that can negatively affect children's well-being, how can they facilitate the right support effectively? (Brodie, 2015, p. 96). Furthermore, for inclusion to occur by providing an integrated approach, an awareness of needs through discussions will ensure what support all professionals offer to the family (Brodie, 2015, p. 101). Also, Jackson, (2012) and Nutbrown, (2012) highlight the importance of suitably qualified practitioners that are well equipped to provide early intervention (Nutbrown and Clough, 2014, p. 160). According to Welsh government, (2017) parents should have confidence and agree with what support can

be provided to them. Hence, the importance of working alongside parents will build upon their confidence and self-esteem that can help them with responding to their child's needs appropriately.

Through conversations and observing mum at the setting, the leader could identify that mum could be suffering with her mental health or even experiencing post-natal depression. This then prompted her to ask mum about speaking to her health visitor who has the expertise to support mum and make the appropriate referrals if need be. Subsequently, leaders and early years workforce should receive training and specific guidance in infant mental health and attachment in order to understand more when difficulties arise in parent-infant relationships (Gov.uk, 2021).

NSPCC, (2024) point out that parents or mothers who are experiencing mental health problems does not always mean their children are negatively affected, and they can still offer them safe and loving care. Nevertheless, there are occasions when they will need some extra support to help them with caring for their children due to changes in lifestyle and circumstances. It cannot be denied, mental health issues during and after pregnancy are common, especially when experiencing poor social and emotional support. Consequently, it can then affect how mothers respond to their babies and children that can lead on to poor development and certain negative behaviours from the child because of a break down in establishing a loving, close bond (National health service, 2011). According to Raghavan and Ruta, (2022) they state how it is during early childhood that it is a critical time for benefiting from early intervention, and it is during these first 1000 days that these benefits are intensified, and risks of a negative impact are reduced. This alongside the importance of nurture and care plays a vital role and shapes a child's future along with the healthy brain development that is needed to ensure this. However, such attachment cannot thrive in an atmosphere whereby there are feelings of despair and worries due to mental health issues or social isolation that will restrict the capacity to offer love and care.

Notably, as part of Bowlby's ground breaking attachment theory he put forward a strong case of how professionals working with children must have the skills to recognise when a child's behaviours change. In turn also, recognise when to start discussions with parents to help them recognise these behaviours in their child and understand why they could be acting in such a way (Holmes, 2014, p. 29). Birth to 5 matters, (2022) believes that a key person in the setting ensures a point of contact for parents, this can also reassure the child and family. As the role involves building a close relationship with the child and parent, this along with strong leadership can implement any support when it is needed to maximise these benefits for families. Leaders can enhance and strengthen family engagement by developing

community partnerships that help to break down any barriers with families who are hard to reach. For example, inviting community groups into the setting where they can speak about what they do can encourage these families to get involved and learn more about how they can benefit. This allows leaders to make the most out of using further expertise that understands how to target particular groups (Welsh government, 2015). For some parents like Charlie's mum who is currently struggling with her mental health and the extra responsibility of a new baby, it is too overwhelming to engage in anything more (Welsh government, 2016). Parents dealing with mental health issues may worry about how others perceives them and that they are being judged, furthermore parents find it incredibly difficult to seek help (Mind, 2024). The role of inclusive leadership could be to ask oneself why parents would not accept the support put in place, and what are there barriers? An inclusive leader can then provide strategies that can make parents feel motivated enhancing engagement (Wilson, 2016, p. 95-96).

For instance, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979) recognised the multifaceted nature of children and their development and how there are many factors that will affect them. The immediate influences in a child's early life consist of parents, early years practitioners or other professionals, these relationships could be ineffective if these individuals do not clearly communicate to one another, resulting in the child's needs being unmet and information not being reported back to the parent which consequently leads to mistrust. Bronfenbrenner's theory suggests that children are not affected by one single factor but a system of relationships over some time, consisting of different individuals, services and organisations (Conkbayir and Pascal, 2014, p.109-110). Therefore, (Aubrey, 2011) claims that inclusive leaders need to maintain a good level of communication is always achieved between professionals to avoid a breakdown of this kind occurring. Additionally, leaders should be working towards shared visions between professionals that are essential to a pleasant well-coordinated service that will benefit children and families. Likewise, the The Wigfall and Moss definition focuses on the importance of shared ideas from services and information sharing in order to achieve the best outcomes (Martin, 2017, cited in Crutchley, 2018). However, these aims are not always straightforward. Consistent findings have been identified as organisation, planning and lack of clear aims were found that inevitably create barriers. Other challenges such as turnover of staff or not suitably qualified staff can also hinder good collaborative working (Aubrey, 2011). In spite of these challenges leaders should have the ability to always encourage effective communication that generates all visions being understood better, and how leaders communicate needs careful consideration by ensuring messages are not misunderstood. All individuals who are in a position of leadership should aim to gain respect and credibility with other professionals, arranging

meetings where the leader can be prepared to establish authority and give out the information, whilst also providing opportunities for others to ask questions and ensure all information relayed is clear and understood (O'Sullivan, 2015, p. 56-57).

To conclude, evidence shows that strong inclusive leadership within a setting provides a sense of belonging, and when leaders are viewed as good role models, staff will replicate these behaviours within practice. As a result, when a team shares the same vision, it enables them to feel motivated to give their best qualities with a commitment to providing inclusive practice at all times.

As a final point, professionals who support children and their families need to ensure that whilst multi agency working is there is always room to provide best practice through further training opportunities in order to provide the best practice. Reflecting back on Charlie scenario, staff at the setting may have had limited time during drop offs to properly speak with mum about Charlie's behaviours and acknowledging how mum was feeling. This will be something that can be examined to ensure more time for staff to speak with parents at these specific times. Some of the barriers identified throughout the process of working as a multi-agency team have provided opportunities to make changes, but to also be more prepared for challenges that may arise along the way in accessing the right support for families.

Section 2

Let us begin by considering what a policy is. First of all a policy can be described as a set of ideas, a plan that is set out by a business, government or organisation. The policy has officially been agreed (Cambridge dictionary, 2024).

According to Levin, (1999, cited in Baldock, Fitzgerald and Kay, 2013, p. 2) says that a policy is used in various different ways, four of which are stated below

- A stated intention
- An indication on a status or course of action
- An action taken by those with responsibility
- An organisational and administrative practice

Levin, (1999) continues stating that it is important to have an awareness that the word policy does carry various meanings. The common elements will entail

- Belongingness
- Status
- Commitment
- Specificity

Notably, the four aspects acknowledges the fact that there are reasons to policy, and are not considered completely aimless. This definition of policy is an attempt of what needs to be achieved by those who work within an organisation by thinking logically about how it can be accomplished (Baldock, Fitzgerald and Kay, 2013, p. 3).

The professional guidance chosen to critically evaluate will be the Flying start Transition guidance, 2017. For the purpose of this portfolio, it will focus section 6 of the guidance from home to flying start childcare.

The first aspect to note about transitions are that they are key events that happen over the life course for children. For example when they experience a move from one setting to the next. A transition can span over a certain amount of time for a child to become established in their new setting. Following this, research suggests that early year's practitioners need to be mindful of how children are impacted and they should be supported into their new environment that aims to ease them in gently (Welsh government, 2017). According to Trodd, (2013, p. 47) points out that it is never easy to predict how a child will respond. Through sensitivity and guiding children and parents though the transition process will have a positive effect. As set out in the flying start transition guidance, supporting material provided beforehand such as 'All about me' or the 'One page profile' can give early years practitioners a better understanding on how to support them (Welsh government, 2017). Senedd research, (2019) point out that flying start specific policy and focus is to support parents and children with school transition and readiness. However, the term 'Early childhood care and education' (ECEC) has become a lot more popular in recent years that encompasses many forms of services for children, implying that children have the right to high quality care and education that is consistent. However, in practice the quality of care and education children receive in all sorts of ECEC are not always providing this in equal measures (Naumann, 2018). Because of this many policy statements are presented quite plainly and are not open for discussion. This is usually due to the person writing the document wants to move things along quickly (Baldock, Fitzgerald and Kay, 2013, p. 3). Take for example when a new child is due to start at the setting leaders should be open to change that value staff members own ideas, providing time that supports collaboration

during transition (Birth to 5 matters, no date). Furthermore, when children enter the setting with additional needs, the flying start transition guidance uses the word 'should' that does not make it clear for the person reading it and could be misinterpreted. All policies that include additional learning needs should be reviewed regularly to ensure everyone understands all principles and considers the best interest of the child. Good leadership is key to ensuring this happens and also to make sure all staff are evaluate their own knowledge and understanding (Children's commissioner of Wales, 2024). However, an assumption can be made that all staff members understand a policy, but in reality not everyone understands certain words, or rather communication between staff is not happening to find a common vocabulary between them (OECD, 2021). Moreover, Booysen, (2020, p 198) points out that inclusive practice is a shared responsibility and not only one individual, but a function of all individuals views that can be applied and understood through practice. Notably, sharing information between practitioners in this guidance is a key point and stands by its equality policy that ensures all barriers are removed, and that family's feel valued and included no matter what their background or additional needs. Soukakou, Dionne and Palikara, (2024) explain these values demonstrates quality inclusive practice by promoting active participation, all whilst supporting all diversity's through implementing strategies for every child. Practitioners should consider diversity and how they perceive them such as parenting, disadvantaged backgrounds and culture can act as a barrier if they do not familiarise themselves with each child's differences (Hallett, 2016). Within the guidance staff should be made aware of these and that they are understood to be able to meet the needs of each individual child who is due to attend the setting (Welsh government, 2017).

Section 3

Strong leadership is what drives and promotes inclusive practice. Leaders promote and understand what is needed for this to continue and benefit all children. For instance if we focus on professional development it can ensure quality inclusion for all children's experiences and of course their families. Early years practitioners have been noted to say how much they feel valued to attend extra training to support children with additional learning needs and felt better equipped, which can also be beneficial for the practitioner. Notably, research has shown that many early years practitioners did not feel equipped to provide adequate support (OECD, 2019). This also shows a commitment from practitioners to enhance own knowledge to promote inclusive practice. All children are individuals and should be valued. When practitioners spend the time to work with and build relationships

with parents they will get to know their child and their unique identity. Leaders should allow time for such opportunities that helps parents feel involved with their child learning and feel comfortable to ask questions or raise any concerns they have. When parents and children feel appreciated and included they are able to be their own authentic self. They will feel like they belong to an environment where they can show their differences and uniqueness. It is Ferdman, 2018, p. 8-9) who maintains that inclusion is simple and straightforward. The approach from leadership will enable a setting for all to develop and flourish in an environment full of opportunities to engage in.

We must remember that every child is included all children are unique, so it is not about treating every child the same. We must pay attention to their individuality and treat them with the respect regardless of background, culture or disability.

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