

All about... inclusion

An equal opportunities policy is no longer a statutory obligation, but ensuring that everyone gets a fair chance is central to good practice. *Babette Brown* and *Vicky Hutchin* explain how

PHOTOGRAPHS AT ALEXANDRA NURSERY SCHOOL AND CHILDREN'S CENTRE, BOLTON, BY GUZELIAN



You may have been surprised to see that the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework, which came into force last month, has no section on 'Equal Opportunities'. But don't be deceived – it is still a cornerstone requirement of what we do and how we work in the early years.

Making sure everyone has a fair chance by taking equality and equal opportunities seriously depends on us being inclusive and putting inclusion high on our agendas. 'Inclusive education is a human right. It's good

education and it makes good social sense' (www.csie.org.uk).

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY INCLUSION?

Although the concept of 'inclusion' has been around for many years in education and early years, the term itself is a source of much confusion. Sometimes it is used to refer just to the need to make adjustments so those with disabilities and additional needs have full access to what is on offer. But at other times, it is given a wider meaning, helping us to think about the ways that some children

Building positive relationships is the key to success

and families might be excluded and how our attitudes, policies and everyday procedures can unintentionally result in some people being unable to participate fully or feeling that they are not included.

In this article, we're using Education Scotland's simple but broad definition: 'Inclusion is about all learners and about taking action to remove barriers to participation and learning. Inclusion also involves eliminating discrimination and promoting equality' (www.educationscotland.gov.uk).

Inclusive practice is at the heart of effective practice because it ►

means we are doing the best for everyone. One of the great joys of working in the early years is celebrating our differences and developing a sense of belonging for all of us. It ensures that we have high expectations of every child as we take on board their individual needs.

BEING INCLUSIVE

Our society is often not inclusive, so trying to make it fairer through the way we work with children and families is particularly important.

Certain groups of people are at risk of being disadvantaged and excluded as a result of a whole host of factors over which they have no control, such as ethnicity, culture, gender, language, poverty, as well as disability and/or special educational need (SEND). The cause may be plainly apparent, but often it is deeply engrained, hidden and unconscious, based on unquestioned, 'traditional' ways of doing things or attitudes. For example, men may be considered superior to women; the English superior to the Irish; rich people superior to poor people. This hidden, unintended discrimination is the most insidious form of exclusion.

Removing discriminatory practices and treating people with equal concern is essential in 'narrowing the gap' between those who suffer disadvantage and the rest, a major concern voiced by the Government. What we do day by day, moment by moment with the children is vital to their success: they learn from everything



around them. They soak up any negative attitudes about themselves, their families and other people just as easily as the positive ones. So it is crucial that we create a positive, inclusive and fair environment.

Although many parts of the UK are now culturally and ethnically diverse, with families from all over the globe, your own setting or locality may not be. It is nonetheless up to all of us to ensure that diversity is represented fully within our settings, in the resources and images we use and our overall environment, as well as attitudes and ethos – while being careful not to stereotype or be tokenistic.

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The Equality Act 2010

Providing equal opportunities has been an established aim of early years for many years. Until last month it was a statutory requirement in the EYFS to have an equal opportunities policy. Also many of the ideas and suggested activities in the guidance *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (2012)* help us to promote equal opportunities and a statement about this appears on the very first page.

Even though a policy is no longer a legal obligation, we still need to address the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

By highlighting 'protected characteristics', the Equality Act makes us consider the main attributes causing exclusion and discrimination, whether it is direct or indirect. The list goes beyond those already mentioned and includes age, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity. The Act makes it unlawful to discriminate against anyone with any of these protected characteristics, so in one way or another it covers us all.

Ofsted expectations

Ofsted continues to monitor how inclusive settings and schools are in meeting children's individual needs.

For early years settings on the Early Years Register, inspectors look at 'how well practitioners demonstrate high expectations, enthuse, engage and motivate children', and assess





how well settings 'help all children to make effective progress, especially those whose needs or circumstances require particularly perceptive intervention and/or additional support.' (Ofsted, August 2014). They go on to list some of the characteristics which may require this.

The new inspection framework for schools specifically mentions the 2010 Equality Act – for example, whether a school and its governors 'promote tolerance of and respect for people of all faiths (or those of no faith), cultures and lifestyles' (Ofsted, July 2014).



It is up to all of us to ensure diversity is represented fully within our settings

SEND code of practice

The recent revision of the SEND Code of Practice which took effect last month (as highlighted in Kay Mathieson's 'All About' article, *Nursery World* 8-21 September), strengthens the responsibilities schools, early years settings and local authorities



have with regard to children with SEND and their parents.

British values

In the response to the consultation on childminder agencies published this August, the Government clarified its view that 'it is not appropriate for public money for early education to go to providers which do not promote fundamental British values'.

To find out what precisely this means we have to refer to the Prevent Strategy 2011. There we are informed that British values are: 'democracy, rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom of speech and the rights of all men and women to live free from persecution of any kind.'

So, although there may be little direct mention of equality and equal opportunities in the EYFS, our responsibilities are made clear through these other avenues.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Continuing to have an equal opportunities policy will help you and your setting meet the requirements of the Equality Act, the expectations of Ofsted and promote the 'fundamental British values'.

As Barbara Kenny, head of Alexandra Nursery School, Bolton, says: 'Equal opportunities are so essential, and it is important that we teach children about them too. If you don't have a policy, how can you check you are promoting equality in your practice?'

What your policy should cover

A good policy will set out clearly and simply your setting's beliefs and aims about promoting equality, outline your procedures to ensure children's individual needs are fully catered for and state what you do to ensure that everyone is valued and respected. As Barbara Kenny told us: 'Having a policy is the best way of sharing our ethos with new staff and parents – you can talk it through and give them a copy. For parents it is really essential, as it tells them what to expect when their child is here.'

The wording of the 2012 EYFS statutory framework is helpful in devising a policy because it outlines what should be covered: '...how the individual needs of all children will be met (including how those children who are disabled or have special educational needs, will be included, valued and supported, and how reasonable adjustments will be

made for them); the name of the special educational needs co-ordinator (in group provision); arrangements for reviewing, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive practices that promote and value diversity and difference; how inappropriate attitudes and practices will be challenged; and how the provision will encourage children to value and respect others.’

A welcome to all

For many parents handing their children over to you arouses anxiety – you are after all a stranger. Whether or not they and their children will have a positive experience in your setting depends to a large extent on how welcome you make them feel.

To ensure that your setting promotes inclusion and a positive attitude to diversity, staff need regular training to develop their confidence and understanding, so they can relate, listen and communicate effectively with children and parents about this. There also needs to be a fair and effective recruitment policy to help ensure that highly motivated, skilled staff from diverse backgrounds are appointed.

Partnership with parents/ carers and families

A true partnership with parents means an equal partnership, working together to support each child. A respectful ethos where everyone is welcomed and accepted for who they are underpins this positive partnership. But valuing every family is easier to say than do.

We may inadvertently assume, for example, that the way our parents brought us up or the way we bring up our own children is the right way. Yet there are very many acceptable ways of bringing up children. Celebrating

Children need the opportunity to see languages other than English



this diversity through talking with parents, enabling them to express their hopes, fears and aspirations about their children, even when they are not proficient in English, provides exciting opportunities to broaden the way we think and open our minds.

Recent research by MacNaughton and Hughes (2011) noted the types of practices, such as using jargon, not providing interpreters, or not allowing enough time to talk with parents, which can result in ‘silencing’ parents, however unwittingly. In these circumstances, it was only the most confident parents who found a way in and often it was those parents who were most likely to share the same views as staff.

The key person role

As well as providing a well-thought out, welcoming and inclusive ethos and environment much of the day-to-day implementation of equal opportunities is up to the key person.

As Barbara Kenny puts it, ‘Equal opportunities and inclusion is a really important part of the key person’s role. It is about planning for each child, based on who they are and where they are now in their learning

CHECKLIST: IS YOUR SETTING INCLUSIVE?

- Do you actively intervene if children are laughed at, picked on or excluded because of the colour of their skin, the texture of their hair or their physical features? This is important because name-calling, physical abuse and being ostracised tend to be common racist experiences. Parents need to know that hurtful comments and name-calling will always be challenged.
- Are children encouraged to ask questions about physical differences and are these answered honestly – not side-stepped by saying, ‘All people are alike’ or ‘Colour doesn’t matter’? Answers like these deny the very differences the questioners can see and are asking about and could convey the message that having a different skin colour or speaking another language is something to be ashamed of, rather than being a source of pride and strength.
- How do you show that you celebrate diversity? For parents and children whose cultures are not being acknowledged and represented, it can be like looking in a mirror and not seeing a reflection.
- Do the children often have the opportunity of hearing, seeing and using languages apart from English, especially those languages from the main minority ethnic communities in Britain?
- Do the resources reinforce or challenge stereotypical thinking? For example, are women and men portrayed in a variety of occupational roles or in stereotypical ones? After telling a Persona Doll story to her group of children about her girl Doll being told by the boys that she couldn’t play with dinosaurs, a practitioner commented: ‘The children expressed almost polar views to the story at first and I was pleased that some of them changed their views. It may be only a temporary change of heart but it has exposed them to the idea that girls can play with ‘boys’ toys’ (Persona Doll Training 2014).
- Is your provision and practice adapted to help children who are disabled and/or have additional needs feel comfortable, involved, included and progress to their full potential?
- Do resources used in domestic play represent the range of communities living in Britain? Are there resources which encourage the boys to play here as much as the girls?
- Do your books and posters reflect a range of family structures and offer children the opportunity to see black, mixed parentage and white girls and boys in leading roles?
- Are there opportunities to listen to and/or make music from a range of cultures?
- Do the resources expand children’s horizons, communication skills, general knowledge and understanding of the world around them?
- Do all parents feel comfortable and relaxed in the environment that has been created? How do you know?
- Can parents share their skills with you and the children?
- Is your equal opportunities policy effective and comprehensive and frequently evaluated by staff and parents?



and development. Of course, every child and family may respond differently to the nursery and what we provide and some will engage with us much more easily than others, but it is about being fair to everyone?

As the key person you work with parents/carers as well as the child. Your first responsibility is to be a good listener and a good observer. Building positive relationships is the key to success.

Encouraging children to respect and value others

How inclusive you are depends largely on your attitudes, ethos and the environment you provide but activities and discussions with the children are really important too. A practitioner in one setting underlined the importance of this when she had an issue with some of the white children in her group. She says, 'They didn't want to hold a new child's hand because he was black. That's when I used a Persona Doll for the first time. The next day when we did our circle singing there was no "I'm not holding your hand". It was completely gone because the Persona Doll story I told had allowed them to reflect on what it would be like if it happened to them.' (Persona Doll Training 2014)

Evaluating practice

Do you have a culturally appropriate and accessible curriculum to reflect and respect the lives, languages, beliefs and experiences of girls and boys from various ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds and from a wide range of ability levels? Are all children engaged, enthused and motivated? How might children feel coming into an environment in which

the adults and most of the children have a different skin colour, the women wear quite different clothes from those worn by women in their family and communities, and the equipment, especially in the home corner, is unfamiliar?

It is important to regularly evaluate your provision and practice as a whole staff team with parents, to ensure that conscious and unconscious racism, sexism, class, ableism and homophobia are eliminated. Doing it together builds a common understanding and everyone learns.

This checklist (*below left*) is a starting point to help you assess whether you are creating an inclusive environ-

FURTHER READING

- B Brown (2008) *Equality in Action: a way forward with persona dolls*, Trentham Books
- B Brown (1998) *Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years*, Trentham Books
- K Mathieson, 'Colour coded?'. *Nursery World*, 19 May 2014
- A O'Connor, 'Equality and Diversity', *Nursery World Practice Guide*, www.nurseryworld.co.uk/equality-and-diversity

ment and suggests how any barriers might be removed.

Babette Brown is an author focusing on anti-discrimination and the co-ordinator of Persona Doll Training; Vicky Hutchin is an early years consultant with a particular interest in equality as well as observation and assessment.

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- Equality Act 2010, www.gov.uk/equality-act-2010-guidance
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- K Mathieson 'All About SEND Code of Practice', *Nursery World*, 8-21 September 2014
- Evaluation schedule for inspections of registered early years provision, *August 2014*, www.ofsted.gov.uk
- *School inspection handbook*, July 2014, No. 120101, www.ofsted.gov.uk
- *Persona Dolls in Action*, DVD and book, www.persona-doll-training.org

