

Intersectionality - A Case Study

Equality, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Working Group, Birth to 5 Matters

The Adeyemi-Clarke Family

The family

Tomi (3 years old) attends a private day nursery four days a week. His referral paperwork lists his mother, Folake, as the primary contact. Folake arrived in the UK from Nigeria two years ago on a Skilled Worker visa as a registered nurse. Tomi lives with Folake and her partner, Rachel, who is white British and works in local government. Rachel is not Tomi's biological parent and has no legal parental responsibility, though she does most of the nursery drop-offs and pick-ups. Tomi has recently received a diagnosis of autism and has an emerging speech delay; English is one of three languages spoken at home, alongside Yoruba and some Nigerian Pidgin.

What the setting "saw"

On paper, the nursery had recorded Tomi as:

- A child with SEND (autism, speech delay)
- A child with EAL
- A child of a single parent (because only Folake appeared on the main contact form)

Each of these was being addressed - there was an EHCP application in progress, a speech and language referral, and EAL support flagged in his learning journal.

What the setting was missing?

Each of these factors were intersecting and creating unique consequences that couldn't easily be grasped by focusing on any single aspect of the family's situation

- **Rachel was repeatedly mis-identified.** Staff assumed she was a childminder, a family friend, or on two occasions, asked her directly "and who are you to Tomi?" in front of him. The setting had no field on its forms for a non-biological co-parent without legal parental responsibility, so Rachel was functionally invisible in the system despite being one of Tomi's primary attachment figures.
- **Folake's expertise was overlooked.** As a nurse, Folake had significant clinical understanding of her son's developmental needs. But in SEND review meetings, staff defaulted to explaining basic concepts to her in simplified

language partly because of her accent, partly because of unexamined assumptions about migrant parents and “capacity to engage.” Folake stopped contributing in meetings. Staff noted this informally as her being “hard to reach”.

- **Tomi’s communication was misread.** Tomi’s speech delay was being assessed in English only. His Yoruba vocabulary (which Folake reported was age-appropriate) was not factored into the SLT assessment. The autism diagnosis, layered onto an EAL assumption, meant staff lowered their expectations of his communication overall rather than understanding what he could already do in his strongest language.
- **The family’s immigration status created invisible pressure.** Folake’s visa was tied to her employment. Any suggestion that Tomi’s needs might require her to reduce hours carried a weight that the setting couldn’t see. When the SENCo gently raised, “Have you considered whether full-time nursery is the right environment for him right now?”, she had no idea she was effectively asking Folake to risk her right to remain in the UK.

Where did the system fail?

None of the individual staff members were acting with ill intent. The failure was structural:

- **Forms** assumed a nuclear, biologically related, officially recognise family structure.
- **SEND processes** assessed the child in English and through a single-culture developmental lens.
- **Parent partnership protocols** treated “engagement” as a measure of parental compliance, not as something the setting needed to actively build with the family on the family’s terms.
- **Safeguarding and pastoral conversations** were held without any awareness of how immigration status might shape what a parent felt able to say.

A setting can have good intentions about race, good intentions about SEND, good intentions about family diversity, and still fail this family because the intentions sit in separate boxes, and Tomi’s life does not.

The practice shift required

1. **Redesign the intake.** Forms should allow families to name who is in the child's life and what role they play, not just who has legal parental responsibility. "Who picks up?", "Who does the child go to for comfort?", "Who should we communicate with?" are different questions, and all of them matter.
2. **Assess communication in the child's full linguistic world.** Before concluding anything about a multilingual child's speech, find out what they can do in every language they're exposed to. Bring parents in as the experts on this, not as the audience for your assessment.
3. **Audit your assumptions about "hard to reach" parents.** If a parent has stopped engaging, ask what the setting is doing that makes engagement costly for them. Accent, migration status, working patterns, previous experiences of being patronised. These are all factors the setting can address, not deficits in the parent.
4. **Never raise hours, attendance, or placement changes without understanding the wider context.** For families on work-tied visas, on Universal Credit conditionality, or in precarious housing an off-hand suggestion from a key worker can carry consequences staff are not always able to recognise
5. **Recognise non-biological co-parents in your everyday practice.** Use the names the child uses for their main caregivers. Address both adults at drop-off. Include both in invitations and updates if the family has indicated that's what they want. This is a small daily practice that signals the whole family is welcome, not just the legally recognised version of it.
6. **Build review meetings around the family's expertise, not the setting's process.** Folake is a nurse. Rachel knows Tomi's morning routine better than anyone. The meeting should start by asking them what they know, not by telling them what the setting has decided.

The point

Anti-racist practice is not a separate workstream from SEND practice, family engagement, or safeguarding. When we treat them as separate, families like the Adeyemi-Clarkes fall through the gaps between them. Working intersectionally means designing your systems for the families you actually have and not the imagined default family your forms were built around.