

Leadership and systems of quality

The definition of quality is the comparison of standards of similar subject matter and analyse the level of which appease particular requirements (Waite, 2012). In reference to the early years, quality is a continuous method of reflection of practice (Canning and Reed, 2012). The purpose of reflection is to improve practice, further strengthen wellbeing and support children and their family (Hadfield, 2015). Quality is a legislative tool to mould appreciation and understanding of the motivation of early years providers and how this should be presented (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016). Quality in the early years is achieved through practitioners working collaboratively, embracing parents and carers, having a deep knowledge of growth and development, and display a commitment to continuing professional development (Welsh Government, 2014; Welsh Government, 2017).

The Welsh Government (2013) suggests high quality early years provision has positive effect on child development and a lasting effect on outcomes, for example speech and language, cognitive development, and social and emotional development. The Welsh Government, (2013) suggests research shows that high quality childcare allows for the growth of long-term positive outcomes and has a powerful influence over choices made later in life. Furthermore, high quality education can lessen the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage and improve attainment throughout education (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2013). For this reason, it is vital practitioners understand the components of high-quality childcare provision which exposes children to high quality experiences giving them the best start to life.

The Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education Project (EPPSE) analysed measures of pre-school quality, the effects of attending pre-school on young children's academia and social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes and the influences of the home environment. The findings from this longitudinal study suggest that children who attend pre school displayed better outcomes, improved attainment, and progression in social, emotional, and behavioural development, moreover children who attended pre-school had positive outcomes throughout primary and secondary education and were more likely to embark on further academic study (Department for Education, 2015).

Quality in the early years is to provide quality encounters with the child at the centre of planning and provision however there are challenges when taking into account the varying factors of what stakeholders view quality as in practice (Georgeson, *et al.* 2014; Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016). Canning and Reed (2012) argue that perceptions of quality must include the wider social communities, varying cultures, and political factors, this scrutinizes how leadership influences quality, the importance of relationships and how multi agencies can influence and improve practice and provision.

Fenech (2011) suggest perspectives of stakeholders including parents and children, vary on what quality childcare in practice looks like. For example, a study by Scopelliti and Musatti (2013) found parents viewed positive relationships with practitioners and peers as high quality, however, further suggests parents showed lack concern over the educational aspect of quality childcare and viewed children's happiness and emotional wellbeing a priority. Similarly, Forry, *et al.* (2013) suggests parent's expectations of quality provision were less than professional expectations and considered more practical experiences as quality in early years provision. Georgeson *et al.* (2014) concluded stakeholders viewed practitioners with a level three qualification as adequate for pre-school however, staff who had limited experience would need to seek the expertise from experienced practitioners, moreover the value of graduate level study is recognised for a deeper understanding of early child development to ensure quality. The study also suggests professional development must be a priority to support practitioners developing skills to embed a deeper understanding of quality practice and provision for early years. The Welsh Government (2014) are committed to high quality provision in the early years and agrees this leads to positive child outcomes in later years both intellectually and socially, this is supported by continuous professional development (CPD). However, barriers to CPD and training arise where there are little opportunities for career progression or pay increases. Practitioners are aware of the benefits of CPD and the impact on experiences for learners however the lack of recognition from Governments and local authorities may have a negative impact on plans for maintaining and raising quality amongst early years practitioners (Lloyd and Hallet 2010; Brown and Devecchi, 2013). Fumoto *et al.* (2012) suggests the key to creating high quality settings is for Governments to be fully committed to establishing safe secure early years environments where high quality practitioners can thrive. Despite this, The Welsh Government (2017) remains committed to CPD for the early years workforce and believes this will further increase high quality provision within the early years sector.

The Welsh Government (2014) guidance states Flying Start childcare provision is not only high quality but the pinnacle for quality childcare provision across Wales taking into consideration high quality learning environments, with high quality practitioners providing high quality and meaningful experiences for children.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is an assessment tool considering the quality of early childhood learning environments and the notion of delivering developmentally appropriate childcare provision (Richards, 2022). The scale is commonly utilised to identify quality childcare with child development, the measures are assessed by observations in the learning environment. According to Botsoglou, *et al.* (2019) central to making a positive impact on the wellbeing, social and emotional development of children is the careful consideration of the physical learning environment and experience within. The Welsh Government (2023) suggests enabling learning environments should be created with the children at the centre of authentic and engaging experiences allowing learners to develop a sense of belonging, curiosity, and value the world around them, this is supported by enabling adults who skilfully scaffold children's learning through playfulness in communication rich environments allowing multiple ways of interaction, extending learners knowledge and allows connections to be made in the world around them.

As high-quality early years is recognised amongst professionals there has been an increase in government drives to increase quality in early years settings (Richards, 2022). The first ECERS-R was published in 1998 and takes into account aspects of learning environments such as space, furnishings and arrangements for playful learning experiences, children's work being displayed, adequate space for gross motor skills and quality of equipment provided, furthermore, routines and personal care, practitioners interaction with children to expand and use vocabulary, activities provided encourage children to explore through fine and gross motor skills, encourages creativity through art, music and movement and imaginative play, exploration of mathematical and scientific concepts through playful approaches, peer interactions, discipline and teaching (Hestenes, *et al.* 2019; Gordon, *et al.* 2013; Kulikovskaya, *et al.* 2021). Sabol and Pianta (2014) argue that the focal point for ECERS-R is centred around quality of the environment and not enough on the process of teaching across developmental domains. Also, the lack of focus on relationships within the setting

which develop feelings of trust, safety and wellbeing which enable children to participate in learning and improves outcomes. Similarly, Setodji, Schaack and Le (2019) suggests high quality is linked to higher outcomes for children, therefore scores may not reflect on the ECERS-R scale results due to the fact it is predominantly focussed on the physical environment, therefore the ECERS-R is not suitable when assessing the links between quality and childhood outcomes.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, third edition (ECERS-3) was published in 2005 and revised to address limitations within the ECERS-R scale, though both scales share similarities the ECERS-3 focusses on impact of the teacher in children's development and not so focussed on resources (Neitzel, *et al.* 2019). However, Hestenes *et al.* suggests the deciding authorities need to consider the impact of the ECERS-3 no longer including teacher interviews, though it may be cost effective and time efficient (2019). Naesby (2021) believes the solidity of the ECERS-3 is the fact it relies solely on observations and measures how the affordance of the learning environment enables children. Moreover, how interactions with adults and peers within the environment supports cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional development. However, Early *et al.* (2018) argues research shows the interrelations between the ECERS-R and ECERS-3 and childhood outcomes are not substantial enough to rely solely on the tool for measuring overall quality, this could be due to the fact that professionals knowledge of high quality is evolving and improving over time and therefore there is not one measurement tool overarching the aspects of high quality (Burchinal, *et al.* 2016). Be that as it may Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) state there are numerous studies which demonstrate the validity of the ECERS and links to children social and emotional development, although, the Effective Provision of Pre School-Education (EPPE) study on effectiveness of settings suggested considerations must be made to include various aspects and the importance of childhood outcomes and development.

The Department for Education (2012) Early Years Foundation Stage framework underpins the importance of interactions between adults and children and states this process creates the foundation for language and cognitive development, this is described as Sustained Shared Thinking (SST), the process of practitioners actively engaging with children and extending their knowledge and understanding (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015; Purdon, 2016). Similarly, the National College for Teaching and Leadership (2013) suggests SST is a powerful aspect of nurturing healthy child development and positive outcomes, moreover,

SST is a powerful method to augment practice in early years environments and is suggested as being a feature of high-quality settings (Blatchford, *et al.* 2002). However, inconsistencies exist when considering research and practice of such quality interactions which prompted the development of another environment rating scale (ERS), The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWS) Scale (Howard, *et al.* 2020).

The purpose of the SSTEWS is to measure the quality of interactions and engagement between practitioners and children between the ages of two and five years old, the implementation which supports and nurtures child development, emotional wellbeing, self-regulation, positive relationships, through meaningful and effective communication (Howard *et al.* 2020; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). Sustained shared thinking is described as an essential skill of practitioners who purposefully support children to extend and develop problem solving skills, analyse different ideas and work together, using in depth dialogue to interact and share information in everyday practice (Neale and Pino-Pasternak, 2017; Howard, *et al.* 2020). Highly skilled practitioners who are attuned to the children's thoughts and feelings, have positive relationships and are skilled in recognising the child's level of development is crucial for the SSTEWS scale (Nursery World, 2023). It is important to consider the challenges faced when promoting SST, Purdon (2016) found that practitioners felt allowing adequate time for every child presented a challenge, moreover, the lack of a shared vision and understanding of SST presents implications for successful implementation. As Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) point out, when engaging in SST, knowledgeable, skilled practitioners who are aware of effective practice, when to engage and when to stand back are key to the success of SST. For this reason, training for using SST is essential to deliver effective practice (Purdon, 2016). This relates to Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development, that children's cognitive and language development is shaped by social interactions with others in their environment, both adults and other children (Bates, 2019; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015).

The SSTEWS scale consists of a 7-point scale which is divided into 5 sub-scales, for example, building confidence, independence and trust, social and emotional wellbeing, supporting and extending language and communication, support learning and critical thinking, assessing learning and language. The key is to analyse the pedagogy within the learning environment, the role of the adults in supporting children's learning and development and the level of quality of interactions with and between children (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015).

Nursery World (2023) suggest the SSTEW scale differs from previous quality rating scales due to the in-depth analysis and defining of the role of the adult. Meanwhile, the Department for Education (2021) Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) analysing the effectiveness of the ECERS and SSTEW scales, question whether the effect of quality early years settings on child development may be predicted from the creation of a quality rating scale with a smaller collection of individual items.

To conclude it is clear quality early years provision has a positive outcome on a child's holistic development (Welsh Government, 2013). To ensure practitioners are aware of quality rating scales and how to use them effectively appropriate training must be made available for scales to be used purposefully (Purdon, 2016). Whilst the benefits of both the ECERS and the SSTEW scales have been discussed, there is speculation as to whether the production of a new scale with fewer items to assess would be more beneficial in predicting child outcomes (Department for Education, 2021). The Welsh Government (2017) suggests practitioners who have studied at graduate level or higher education but who are passionate about creating positive experiences for children can enhance quality in early years settings and are key to giving children the best start to life. Though there are challenges to using quality assurance measurement tools, the scales are said to be a useful tool in analysing and improving quality in early years settings and promote positive outcomes for all children.

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