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LEADERSHIP FOR SYSTEMS OF QUALITY

The Benefits of Additional Methods of Promoting and Ensuring Quality Above Statutory Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

In Wales, as in many other countries across the world, the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has recently been prioritised in government policies and programmes. This is due to the increasing amount of research that indicates multiple benefits not only for a child's cognitive and socio-emotional development and well-being but also for the future economic prosperity of the child and the country (Melhuish et al., 2017; Welsh Government, 2017). Whilst low quality ECEC has been found to be detrimental to children, researchers have found that high quality ECEC provides a marked difference to a child's long-term life outcomes. Therefore, it is vital to determine what is and what constitutes quality, why high-quality is important and what measures may be required in order to improve and maintain it (OECD, no date, Mathers and Singler, 2012).

WHAT IS QUALITY?

Quality is a complex, multi-faceted concept which has a different meaning, to different people of different cultures in different societies and countries around the world (Nutbrown, 2006; Jackson, 2010, Taguma et al., 2012). Defining quality in relation to early childhood education and care (ECEC) is problematic as it means different things to children, parents, practitioners and those in authority (Mathers and Singler, 2012; Bonetti, 2018). A multitude of factors also influence and contribute to how quality is perceived, such as government policies and programmes, practitioners' qualifications, values and beliefs, needs and agendas – the list is everchanging and the dynamics ever variable (Jackson 2010, Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016).

Bonetti (2018) argues that quality in ECEC should be considered in two ways:

- **Structural quality** – Aspects that can be easily gauged and controlled, that is child-practitioner ratios, group size, practitioner qualification, training and continued professional development.

- **Process quality** – characteristics that constitute a child's daily experiences, for instance the way a child's needs are met, play activities chosen and the nature of the interactions experienced by the child, parents and practitioners.

These two areas are interdependent with process quality requiring the presence of the necessary structural aspects to function favourably.

However, research findings indicate that practitioners perceived partnerships with parents as being pivotal to their view of a quality ECEC. With parents identified their child's happiness and safety as an indicator of quality, whereas governments place an emphasis on the economic benefit of supporting parents, especially females back into employment (Jackson, 2010; Cottle and Alexander, 2014; OECD, no date). Nonetheless, Nutbrown (2006) emphasises that whilst a setting may be considered to be of high-quality its true merit is the degree to which parents/carers consider its services to be meaningful and appropriate. This supports Tobin's (2005) argument that meaningful standards of quality should be developed and constructed through conversations between parents, practitioners and other professionals involved in the ECEC setting.

WHY IS HIGH-QUALITY IMPORTANT?

Whilst, uncertainty surrounds the definition of quality, research evidence from the associated Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPY), Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE), Effective Pre-school Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3–16+) and the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) longitudinal studies (Siraj et al., 2002; Sylva, 2004; Taggart et al., 2015, Melhuish et al., 2017) asserts that high-quality ECEC is essential as it increases and improves all children's language development, cognitive, socio-emotional and educational outcomes not only in the short term but also on a long term basis. Findings also indicate that disadvantaged children gain more from high-quality ECEC due to their cognitive and social capabilities being less developed on starting formal school (OECD, no date; Melhuish et al., 2017). However, Blanden et al., (2017) argue that children's outcomes are weakly affected by the quality of the setting they

attend. Sammons et al., (2017) refute the validity of these findings due to a poor research design and limitations in the data available.

MEASURES FOR IDENTIFYING AND IMPROVING QUALITY

With the research findings of the REPY, EPPE and EPPSE studies indicating that the benefits for children are dependant on the provision of high-quality ECEC settings it is important that measures are put in place to improve quality. A starting point for the achievement of this is by the provision of clearly stated quality goals and minimum standards (Ho et al., 2010, OECD, 2012).

The Welsh Governments quality goals in respect of ECEC are clearly laid out in the 'Taking Wales Forward: 2016 – 2021' and 'Prosperity for All: The National Strategy' policies. They plainly state that the early years and learning are one of their shared key themes and priority areas to be addressed. Their objective in doing so is to enable a child to have the best start in life allowing them to achieve their full developmental and learning potential and improve their life chances and outcomes (Welsh Government, 2016; Welsh Government, 2017). Nonetheless, OECD (2012) profess the setting out and achievement of these goals is not without its difficulty. Translating these goals into reality can be problematic and as is the case here in Wales when trying to regulate ECEC goals with those of other levels of education or child-focused services when the responsibility of which falls under different ministries (OECD, 2012; MacDonald, 2018).

The minimum standards for ECEC settings here in Wales are clearly set out in the 'National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for Children up to the Age of 12 years' (Welsh Government, 2016) with the Care Inspectorate for Wales (CIW) periodically inspecting ECEC settings. The inspectorate framework of CIW provides independent assurance about quality ensuring that as a minimum the children 'have a voice and are kept safe, nurtured, treated with respect and helped to develop their full potential' (National Minimum Standards, 2016: 4). Minimum standards are viewed as beneficial for parents/ carers as they inform and assist their decision making process when choosing an appropriate ECEC setting (Nutbrown, 2006; OECD, 2012). However, Cottle and Alexander (2012: 651) caution that standards provide only one way to understand quality and should, therefore, only be used as a starting point.

Standards of quality rarely remaining constant due to their multi-faceted and complex nature and it is for this reason that methods of assessment are considered essential (Nutbrown, 2006; National Minimum Standards, 2016; Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016). There are a wide range of measures available which can be used to assess and improve quality, such as inspections, quality assurance schemes/ programmes and Environmental Rating Scales (ERS). Inspections such as those carried out by CIW and ESTYN are compulsory methods for ECEC settings as they provide interested parties such as parents, practitioners and local authorities with an independent measure of quality: ensuring accountability and minimum standards are met (Nutbrown, 2006). However, inspection reports are not able to assess all aspects of quality. They occur intermittently, have a broad approach and due to their brief duration may fail to acknowledge aspects of the setting which may be valued by others. This inadvertently may demotivate practitioners within the setting so affecting the standards of quality (Mathers and Singler, 2012).

The aim of quality assurance schemes (QAS) is to assist settings in improving their level of quality, through assessment and comparison with the level of quality they desire so identifying the areas of practice which require improvement or development (Mercer, 2000; Mathers et al., 2012). They are considered beneficial as many schemes offer mentoring and support alongside external assessment and accreditation, with self-evaluation playing a pivotal role in quality assurance (QA). However, they may be viewed negatively and resented by some practitioners who may believe that it is an additional method of assessment and unnecessary interference. Nonetheless, they provide parents with additional information about the quality of a setting, above and beyond that of CIW and ESTYN reports thus assisting their decision-making process when choosing a high-quality ECEC setting (Mathers and Singler, 2012).

ECO-SCHOOLS

The damaging and costly effects of human actions to the environment are now well documented and visually evident, an issue that impacts upon individuals and global governments alike. Keen to tackle these issues, this mentor supported, relatively low cost (only outlay is the purchase of a 'Green Flag' once the award has been gained)

Eco-Schools quality assurance programme aims to increase children's understanding of the effects that their actions can have on the sustainability of the immediate environment in which they live (Keep Britain Tidy, 2013).

Introduced in 1994, the Eco-Schools programme is recognised worldwide and is well-established engaging over 19.5 million young people across 67 countries. Eco-Schools are perceived as being an asset to their community helping to promote a positive school image to parents, potential parents and practitioners, and the community alike (Eco-Schools, no date). The programme framework is easy to understand and follow, supported by external Eco-Schools coordinators and links with the Successful Futures cross curricular responsibilities (Donaldson, 2015; Keep Wales Tidy, no date). From the perspective of quality recognition and perception this is advantageous and supported by research evidence from Ofsted (2009) and Keep Britain Tidy (2013) who state that schools who emphasise and focus upon environmental and sustainability topics have seen positive outcomes for children and improvement in standards and achievement across the school.

Children who participate have been found to achieve socio-emotional and educational benefits (Ofsted, 2009; Keep Britain Tidy, 2013). Although supported by a practitioner, or practitioners, who undertake the role of 'Eco-School Coordinator', the programme is designed to be pupil led. This actively promotes the pupils voice so respecting Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and encourages the children to work collaboratively, in order to identify, research, deliberate, decide and and put into action their own ventures for improving sustainability and their immediate and community environment (ESTYN, no date; Eco-Schools, no date). Research findings indicate that this has led to an increase in children's confidence and self-esteem so improving their attitudes to learning and well-being (Ofsted: 2009; Keep Britain Tidy, 2013).

The Eco-Schools programme also encourages and links in with the Successful Futures cross-curricular responsibilities of literacy, numeracy and digital competency whilst also integrating Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) (Donaldson, 2015; Keep Wales Tidy, no date). The child-led and chosen ventures taking place both indoors and outdoors and encompassing a broad spectrum of activities the programme also compliments the ethos of the Foundation Phase

Framework (Welsh Government, 2015). Ofsted (2009) state that learning about sustainability in this manner engages children as it produces visible and tangible results that are relevant to their lives. They also found that those schools and settings who not only integrated the programme into their curriculum but also the ethos of the school, involving parents, practitioner, governors and those in the wider community gained maximum benefit.

Whilst the research studies to date have been few, and of a relatively small scale, they have found that schools and settings involved in the programme have reported an increased sense of pride and achievement in children and practitioners. Alongside this is an increase in pupil confidence, self-esteem and motivation to learn which lead to better behaviour and attendance so improving cognitive skills and learning outcomes. (Ofsted, 2009; Keep Britain Tidy, 2013). Nonetheless, whilst the programme is most successful in primary schools it fails to address and include opportunities for those settings who care for younger children such as nurseries and childminders. An early year's programme is currently being developed by Liverpool John Moores University but has yet to be incorporated as an official part of the Eco-Schools programme (Liverpool John Moores University, no date).

SUSTAINED SHARED THINKING AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING SCALE

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) Scale is an observational assessment tool introduced in 2015 to assist with the assessment of quality in ECEC settings. The longitudinal EPPE research study formed the basis upon which the scale has been developed having identified the importance of high process quality and those pedagogies and practices connected to the concept of sustained shared thinking (SST) (Sylva et al., 2004; Siraj et al., 2015; Howard et al., 2018).

Identified by OECD (2012) and Siraj et al. (2015) as an important concept for high quality practice, sustained shared thinking is a problematic concept to develop. In order to assist practitioners in its development the SSTEW scale precisely confirms and explains what SST should resemble in a high quality ECEC setting. This is advantageous as it has been found to provide effective support for all children, including those with additional learning needs or from disadvantage backgrounds, by

enabling them to gain the constructs of effective communication, strong relationships, self-regulation and concept development (Kingston and Siraj, 2015; Siraj et al., 2015). However, the scale does have limitations. It only addresses a narrow age range, in that it is designed to promote practice with children aged between two and five years old. It does not consider the environment of the ECEC setting but concentrates specifically on the practitioner – child/children and child – child interactions thus taking into consideration the responsiveness of the practitioner to the child/children and how the learning and development of the child/children is then supported (Kingston and Siraj, 2015).

Nonetheless, Siraj et al. (2015) and Kingston and Siraj (2015) advocate the use of SSTEWS in combination with other environmental rating scales, such as the Early Childhood Environmental Scale- Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms et al., 2015), the Infant/ Toddler Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ITERS-R) (Harms et al., 2017) and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale – Extension (ECERS-E) (Sylva et al., 2010). The ITERS-R and ECERS-R consider the environmental aspects of an ECEC setting, whilst the ECERS-E concentrates on planning and the curriculum. Combined use will ensure that all aspects of an ECEC setting are assessed (Kingston and Siraj, 2015).

Siraj et al. (2015) declares that the SSTEWS scale does have a multitude of uses and can be used to support research, self-evaluation and improvement, and audit and regulation. Practitioners who are already trained users of the ITERS-R, ECERS-R or ECERS-E scales should find the SSTEWS scale comparatively straightforward to use (Siraj et al., 2015). Although, due to the complexity of the concepts involved in the content of the scale, Siraj et al. (2015) advise that authorised training and professional development be undertaken by those who wish to utilise and implement the scale. With the scale still in its infancy training and professional development are currently being devised for use in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. However, the scale has already been used in a research study in Australia where it has found that it is capable of identifying environmental differences that are required for children's numeracy development. Further information on its reliability and predictive validity will be gained following the completion of the longitudinal Study of Early Education and Development funded by the Department for Education in 2020 (Kingston and Siraj, 2015).

CONCLUSION

When it comes to the provision of quality ECEC it is vital that practitioners have an understanding of what constitutes the ever changing, complex multi-faceted nature of quality so that they are able to measure it, and either maintain or improve it, in relation to their setting. Over thirty years of evidence gathered by the EPPE and EPPSE projects show that high quality ECEC is beneficial for the short- and long-term learning and life outcomes of children. There are a number of measures available for identifying and improving quality, such as CIW and ESTYN inspections, quality assurance programmes such as Eco-Schools and quality assessment and improvement tools such as SSTEW. However, in order to encompass all aspects of the complexities of providing a high-quality ECEC settings should use a broad spectrum of measures as a single measure will not be effective in doing so.

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