

What is Quality?

Quality has an impact on children's developmental outcomes. There is an obvious association between the quality of an early years setting and improved child outcomes as mentioned by Sylva, et.al., (2004). This is also supported by Eadie, et. al, (2022) who states that high-quality early childhood education and care has the potential to improve all children's learning and development. However implementing high-quality programmes that incorporates deliberate teaching into play-based, developmentally appropriate learning experiences is hard and requires investment in lasting and diverse professional support. The UK Government (2003) established the government's vision in the every child matters act, highlighting 'quality' in early childhood provision, education, care, staffing, training, leadership, and 'joint-working'. This has required a multidisciplinary approach, bringing together professional teams of practitioners from many backgrounds and disciplines to collaborate in more complex environments.

Wales is committed to providing high quality settings. To do this Wales introduced a quality framework for early childhood play, learning and care in Wales. The ECPLC Quality framework (Welsh Government, 2023) identifies three enablers that help to provide Quality to settings in Wales. These are; enabling adults who are interested in the development of babies and young children, effective environments that promote play and exploration, and engaging experiences that capitalise on the children's inherent curiosity. In addition the new curriculum for Wales supports quality standards in early years as The Welsh Government (2020) states how the curriculum for Wales framework is central to promoting efforts to enhance quality standards for everybody, by reducing the educational gap, and creating an education system that is both a source of national pride and public confidence. Similarly important are our practitioners who facilitate learning and progression, and wider stakeholders such as families and communities, to whom we look to help our schools and settings in designing their curricula within the Curriculum for Wales Framework. However, the Welsh Government's (2011) 'Nurturing Children, Supporting Families' policy statement emphasises the importance of multiple variables in improving childcare quality.

Cottle (2012) believes that due to the different perspectives of stakeholders involved with early years settings this is likely to result in an equally broad range of perspectives on what constitutes 'quality' as well as the major aims and expected advantages of early years care and education. Due to how broad the expectations and perspectives of what quality in early years settings entails it can be beneficial for settings to use additional methods and tools to improve and expand quality.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS).

Howard, et.al. (2018) explains how the sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing scale (SSTEWS) was created to help recognise and differentiate between more and less effective interactions in ECEC settings, where effectiveness is

measured by its impact on young children's developmental outcomes. SSTEWS is built on principles and practices that reflect the evidence base for effective practice. It is based on contemporary thinking and developmental theories, and it takes into account relational pedagogy and practices that urge educators to have responsive, warm, and compassionate interactions with children.

The SSTEWS scale offers several benefits for improving and expanding quality in early years settings. According to Siraj, Kingston, Melhuish and Sylva (2015), one of these benefits involves professional development as for a practitioner to implement the SSTEWS scale they will need to be skilled in assessing, monitoring and supporting children's socio-emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development this will undoubtedly require practitioners to gain a deep understanding of effective and quality practice. Which will then promote ongoing professional development and reflective practice. In agreement with this Macdonald, Gealy and Tinney (2019) discuss how their research team received rigorous training in the use of the SSTEWS scale, which included two days of training from the scale authors, a considerable number of observation hours, and a benchmarking visit with the scale's trainer/author to ensure inter-rater reliability. This strengthens the case that intensive learning and development is involved to strengthen practitioners knowledge and skills when implementing the SSTEWS scale.

Furthermore the SSTEWS scale provides numerous advantages for increasing and expanding quality in early childhood settings. The SSTEWS scale fosters the development of healthy interactions between practitioners and children. Pacey (n.d.) supports this by stating that the SSTEWS scale focuses on how adults, particularly practitioners and teachers, help children with their language for thinking as well as their social and emotional well-being. This contributes to creating a supportive environment that promotes emotional well-being and learning. Furthermore, Hoare (n.d.) adds that the SSTEWS scale focuses on practitioners, and how they support children's learning and development. This is accomplished by practitioners listening to children, expressing real interest in what they have to say, and respecting children's ideas and choices, by doing this practitioners can create meaningful relationships with children through high-quality interactions.

Another advantage to the SSTEWS scale is the commitment to continuous quality improvement in early years settings. This is especially essential as Reed and Canning (2012) express how the broad definition of quality is always changing due to political and social influence. Therefore by monitoring progress and improvement and following political and social changes it will foster excellence in the setting and ensure that the learning environment remains adaptable to quality improvements.

However, while there are several advantages to adopting the SSTEWS scale to improve and expand quality, there are certain restrictions. For example, it may be vulnerable to bias because it is based on the SSTEWS scale assessors' interpretation of quality classroom interactions and environment. This could have an impact on the credibility of the SSTEWS scale assessment. Eckhouse, Lum, Conti-Cook, and Ciccolini (2018) agree that any assessment method based on human judgement is subject to bias.

Another limitations to the SSTEWS scale is how time consuming it can be as it requires the assessor to spend significant time observing the setting. Siraj, Kingston, Melhuish and Sylva (2015a) explains how typically a SSTEWS scale observation will take up to 3-4 hours however, at the end of the observation, the assessor will need to speak with a member of staff who is free of early education and childcare obligations and other distractions. And the assessor will need time to review any relevant papers and ask any additional questions.

Overall, The SSTEWS scale is an effective tool for promoting quality and continual improvements; however, it is important to recognise limitations and consider possible additional measures to ensure a thorough assessment of the quality of the setting.

Quality of care report

Registered childcare establishments in Wales are required to file an annual Quality of Care Report. This self-evaluation report is vital in helping settings assess how best to build, maintain, and enhance services so that they meet the highest standards of safe, quality childcare and play as stated by Pacey (n.d. a). Furthermore Care Inspectorate Wales (2019) explains that an effective quality of care review attempts to establish the extent to which people receiving services have their rights met. The review should clearly illustrate how the service offered makes this happen and include the following elements: defining internal quality standards, gathering information, doing an analysis and reporting, and action planning.

The quality of care report offers several benefits. One of those benefits is the transparency the quality of care reports offers by providing parents and stakeholders with insights into the quality of care provided in early years. This is supported by the Welsh Government (2023) who believe that effective team and community relationships should prioritise transparency, responsibility, ethical behaviour and trust in the early years workforce.

Similarly to the SSTEWS scale the quality of care report also provides the opportunity for continuous improvement. Additionally Care inspectorate (2022) state that the culture of continual improvement promotes high-quality practice and better outcomes for everyone. It emphasises that self-evaluation is the responsibility of all stakeholders in the setting. Furthermore, the Welsh Government (n.d.) promotes continuous improvement by stating that continuous quality improvement and reflective practice are essential for purposeful outcomes. To realise their objective, settings should evaluate different viewpoints, highlight beneficial aspects, and learn from them. Reflective practice is essential for promoting high-quality play, learning, and care. Regularly reflecting on quality can lead to professional development and better outcomes for all children in the setting.

Furthermore the quality of care report offers quality assurance. The report is used as a quality assurance tool to ensure that children receive high-quality care that promotes their growth and well-being. Care Inspectorate Wales (2019) discusses how the service provider is responsible for driving service improvement, establishing a system to ensure compliance with organisational, professional, and legal

requirements, and supporting users to achieve their personal goals. As well as considering quality assurance outcomes while planning for improvement. Moreover Ofsted (2019) suggest that Quality assurance methods such as regular evaluations, monitoring, and evaluation assist in maintaining standards, identifying areas for development, and eventually improving the overall efficacy of early childhood provision.

While the quality of care report is useful, it may have limitations. This includes the report's narrow focus. It is stated by Care inspectorate Wales (2019b) how the evidence gathered in the quality of care report should be analysed by the service provider to draw judgements about performance and outcomes. This should contain comparisons to previous quality of care reviews, any patterns or trends discovered, any emergent challenges as well as any lessons learned. However, issues such as emotional support and cultural awareness may be overlooked or disregarded possibly due to how difficult these areas are to measure quality.

Another possible limitation to the quality care of report when it comes to measuring quality in the early years settings is it may not always represent present circumstances or take into account differences in individual experiences. Layzer and Goodson (2006) explain how A one-time snapshot is produced when the quality of care report measures what occurs only on a specific day. The activities and interactions in any given setting can change dramatically over the course of a week or a month.

In conclusion, while quality of care reports serve an important purpose in establishing accountability and pushing changes in childcare provision, it is essential to overcome possible disadvantages by careful planning and continuous monitoring of the assessment process.

Discussion

Overall, The SSTEWS scale and the quality of care review are both tools for assessing the quality of provision, but they focus on different elements. The SSTEWS scale focuses on different aspects of an early childhood setting, including staff training, the physical environment, and children's activities. This aids in the identification of quality areas in the setting as well as places for improvement. While the quality of care review often involves evaluating the overall quality of care delivered to children in early childhood settings. The review frequently includes observations, interviews, and evaluations of policies and processes to ensure that children receive high-quality care and education.

While the SSTEWS scale provides a systematic framework for evaluating specific components of early childhood programming, the quality of care review gives a more comprehensive assessment of the overall quality of care and education for young children. Both are effective tools for fostering high standards and ongoing development of quality in early childhood settings.

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