

When considering quality of care and provision within the early years, it is important to recognise that arguably the definition of what 'quality' looks, sounds and feels like is a subjective matter. Pacey (2024) discusses quality within the early years to be a plethora of combined factors; staff qualifications, communication, relationships with children and families, nutritional meals, well planned and structured days, hygienic and stimulating environments to name a few (Pacey, 2024). Conversely, Welsh Government (2022) has discussed process quality and highlighted the importance of creating safe learning environments where children are actively listened to, to meet their needs (Welsh Government, 2022).

A broader perspective has been adopted by Peter Moss (2016) who raised the discussion of quality being a choice, rather than a necessity. Moss (2016) argues that quality within care and education is a democratic construct, employing methods which align with political and ethical narratives. According to Moss (2016) the language of 'quality' consistently influences government policies, curriculums and academic research. Furthermore, Moss (2016) critiques the lack of questioning for the concept of quality, arguing that though it is understood that quality indicates a longing for something that is 'good', it loses its meaning entirely in the process. Moreover, Moss (2016) questions the use of language when assessing performance; terms such as efficiency and performance. Moss (2016) goes on to argue how the quality of early years education is ultimately open to interpretation and has multiple meanings, due to concluded knowledge being collated from various perspectives and biases.

However, this analysis fails to take account of the limited amount of research on quality within early years education. Arguably the research that is available is inconsistent and therefore an unreliable source for policy authors and educators to be able to improve systems and provision (Eadie et al., 2022). Similarly, Hooper (2021) asserts that there is very minimal research focusing specifically on defining quality within the early years (Hooper et al., 2021). Nevertheless, Moss (2016) raises a wider perspective on the prevalence of a society filled with regulatory frameworks, which have the power to minimise the possibilities of alternative thinking and practice due to the constraints they hold. Moss (2016) challenges early years professionals to

dare to critique practice, use their imagination and exploration to discover new possibilities and go beyond the limitations of 'quality' as we know it (Moss, P. 2016).

Research suggests that there is evidence to confirm that the quality of childcare does have a substantial impact on a child's early development (Helmerhorst, 2017). Studies have shown that children benefit from intentional care and learning, where practitioners focus on having a relational approach to their provision; where they know their children, their interests and their needs well. Research has shown the benefits of children learning new skills and ideas, through a process of learning where their passions and interests are at the forefront. Children are then able to expand on the experiences and knowledge they have acquired already; children show an increased level of engagement and positive wellbeing when learning in this way. This approach is adaptable and can be simplified or made more complex depending on the age and stage of children using provision (Waters-Davies et al., 2023).

One of the limitations with this approach, is that within UK Government funded schools, there may be up to sixty children in a classroom at a time. Studies have shown that there are benefits to both well-being and learning achievement for young children participating in provision within a smaller class size (Francis, 2019). Furthermore, educators are more limited in their ability to be able to spend enough time with each child to build those close-knit relationships with the children and have the necessary ongoing communication with their families, which can arguably be compromising the level of quality provision. This is where many families have opted for privately run schools where class sizes are smaller, creating confidence in the quality of provision due to educators arguably having more opportunities to encompass that relational and intentional approach, benefiting children's overall learning experience and generating positive results in their development and academic achievements (Parsons, 2017).

Furthermore, an open and relational approach between practitioners, educators and families via methods of parents' evenings and questionnaires creates a space for measuring quality of provision; a time for discussion and feedback, where practitioners can reflect, establish goals and further improve their practice in a way that benefits the children's well-being and development going forward. Studies have

shown that positive relationships between parents and teachers contributes positively to children's academic achievement (Cheung and Caldwell, 2023).

The Care Inspectorate Wales, also known as the 'CIW', is the regulatory body responsible for overseeing a range of care services within Wales, ensuring that settings are meeting all legal and national standards. The CIW register and inspect care services, monitor provision and enforce necessary actions when required. Furthermore, the CIW provide guidance and support to care providers, as well as providing public assurance by releasing their inspection findings and ratings on care services via written reports which the public can access. This promotes accountability for provision within the care sector and ensures quality and overall safety for provision users. The National Minimum standards, or 'NMS' is a key document the CIW use to set out the non-negotiable standards required to run a daycare service. The CIW inspectors use this document as a baseline to assess and evaluate the quality and performance of daycare settings. If an inspection reveals any noncompliance with standards within the NMS, it can result in recommendations or enforcement actions such as full daycare closure if they believe a daycare setting to be unsafe or operating outside of legal and national standards. The CIW defines quality based on six key factors within daycare practice. Safety and wellbeing, learning and development, staffing and training, environment, partnership with parents/carers and regulatory compliance. The CIW believe these six aspects collaboratively contribute to ensuring that children receive quality childcare and learning (CIW, 2016).

The Care Inspectorate Wales clearly defines the standards of care which service providers must follow through the National Minimum Standards, which provides an equal baseline of care for providers to build upon. One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether the CIW are aiming to achieve high quality. Furthermore, are the national minimum standards really ensuring quality provision for those subject to it. Arguably, there are weaknesses within the national minimum standards of care, particularly for the practicalities of meeting standards and what that looks like for day-to-day provision. An example of this would be staffing ratios. The minimum standard of ratios two-year-olds is one staff member to four children. As soon as a child turns three years old, they are then included in a ratio of one staff

member to eight children (CIW, 2016). This is double the number of children over night. Thoughts to consider here; what evidence have the Care Inspectorate Wales collated to conclude that three-year-olds are ensured quality provision, when they experience such a decrease in adult supervision? Is this standard really ensuring an adequate level of safety and a quality care?

The National Day Nurseries Association, also known as the 'NDNA', is a quality assurance scheme and membership organisation. The NDNA represents and provides support for early years settings within the UK; advocating for Government policies and initiatives that aim to positively impact, support and develop quality early years nursery provision. When nursery settings join the NDNA as members, they have access to various training for professional development, articles on current research, conferences for senior leaders, resources and support. Furthermore, the NDNA advises settings on how they can maintain and further develop provision to a high-quality standard. However, there are some disadvantages to this scheme to be discussed. Nursery settings must pay a fee to be an NDNA member and once they have membership, they are able to display a certificate in their setting and broadcast their membership status (NDNA, 2024a). This can paint a positive narrative to potential stakeholders, giving a sense of confidence in the quality of a setting, due to a certificate confirming they are a member of a quality assurance organisation.

However, nurseries do not have to meet any requirements other than paying the membership fee to join; meaning any nursery setting can sign up. A further limitation to explore is that once a nursery setting is a member, they are not obligated to attend any training or conferences, which are also only available at an additional cost on top of the membership fee, which some nurseries may not deem affordable. Arguably, these combined factors minimise the credibility of the NDNA membership. There is no accountability as to how a nursery is using their membership and whether the way in which they operate reflects the vision and mission of the NDNA (NDNA, 2024b). Therefore, in unfortunate instances where nursery settings have poor practice, they can use their membership status to their advantage. Nonetheless, though the NDNA provides useful tools for aiding quality, there are limitations and areas for improvement. This leaves the question of whether the NDNA really are doing their utmost to make their services accessible for all and providing the highest

level of support for the development and maintenance of quality practice within the nursery sector, as they suggest they are in their quality statement (NDNA, 2024b).

An Infant/ Toddler Rating Scale or 'ITER', is an environmental rating framework used to evaluate the quality of provision, providing practitioners with the opportunity to conclude their strengths and highlight areas for improvement. Similarly, the Early Childhood Environment Rating scale, or 'ECER' focuses on accessing the premises environment, as well as reflecting on effectiveness overall learning provision. In contrast, the Sensitivity to Temperament in Early Childhood Settings or 'STEW' scale, focuses on how well practitioners are creating nurturing environments, where they promote a holistic approach with the children in their care and adapt practice well according to the children's needs. All three rating scales have a series of statements in various areas, where each statement is rated with a tick box scoresheet from 1 to 7, 1 being inadequate up to 7 being excellent (ERSI, 2024).

A major criticism is that the statements in these scales can be incredibly vague and open to interpretation, meaning findings can become inconsistent. Furthermore, tick boxes are limiting, there is no option for comment or further observations which can lead to a shallow information with inaccurate outcomes. Arguably, an improvement would be a scale with more extensive and specifically worded statements. Overall, it is difficult to judge the accuracy of a measurement of quality due to the overall broad and subjective nature of what defines quality.

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