

Quality Provision in the Early Years

What is quality?

Quality in the early years is a topic that's definition is highly discussed and debated within the sector (Cottle, 2012). Manchester City Council (2023) state that high-quality early years childcare can be defined as contributing positively to improving outcomes for children. Iles (no date) furthers this and puts forward that a cohesive understanding of what contributes to high-quality provision in the early years is important in giving children the best start in life. Quality provision in early education and care is secured by a workforce that is confident in working together, parent relationships, an understanding of child development and the child at the centre of all pedagogy (Foundation Years, no date).

Pacey (no date) agrees that an understanding of the importance of child development contributes to the improvement of quality childcare as they put forward that more qualified practitioners deliver better quality care. However, although Nutbrown (2012) agrees that practitioners who are qualified tend to provide a higher quality care they argue that the content of level 3 qualifications lack substance and need to strengthen practitioners knowledge on child development, play and care to guarantee quality. Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Alback support the notion of childcare qualifications needing to be updated and more accessible for all however, contrastingly suggest that the childcare sector is increasingly struggling to recruiting practitioners for qualifications and in turn is struggling to fund the change of these qualifications.

Bland (no date) emphasises how quality can be a challenge to define as it can be very personal based upon pedagogy, experience and own opinions. Finding Quality Child Care (no date) furthers this and suggests that high quality childcare through a child's eyes means feeling at ease and accepted in a setting, by giving them a voice it allows them to feel important (Early Years Careers, 2016). Contrasting this, Early Excellence Inspirational Learning (2021) state that a high quality childcare setting provides children with a space with resources that spark natural curiosity and allow open ended play opportunities. Providing children with authentic resources sparks a wider range of experiences and presents opportunities for critical thinking and exploration therefore improving quality of care and education (Rides, 2021).

Quality in the early years is important and can be affected by all attributes such as staff knowledge and pedagogy and the implementation of these in settings, as supported by Hayes, Toole and Halpenny (2022). High quality provision in early years settings lead to

children achieving higher educational outcomes than children who attend settings with poor quality provision, as supported by Foundation Years (no date). This is furthered by Early Years Development (2018) who detail that high quality childcare in the early years has been linked to healthy cognitive, behavioural and physical development and so, lays a foundation for future development and attainment (Archer and Oppenheim, 2021).

However, Stirrup, Duncombe and Sandford (2014) highlight that early years settings that provide high quality provision are only open for parents with a higher income meaning that children from lower income families do not gain this foundation for the future. Rice et al (2019) supports this and presents that low income families lack money for stable, suitable and quality childcare which impacts the child's development and attainment when starting school. Welsh Government (no date) offer a government-funded childcare scheme for families who earn less than £100,000 a year that offers 30 hours of childcare a week for 3-4 year olds, it aims to offer quality childcare to those who cannot afford it (Ceredigion County Council, 2023). However, Jacobs (2019) suggests that childcare offers may stunt quality in childcare as due to high numbers of children and lack of staff correct ratios may be questioned and not adhered to.

In order to ensure quality continuous improvement and professional development must be undertaken in the setting (Brighton and Hove City Council, no date). Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (2020) highlight that it is everybody in the settings responsibility to uphold standards and do their utmost best to provide high quality care to the children in their setting. Weinstein (2022) contrasts this by detailing that it is the responsibility of management to uphold quality through training opportunities for staff and funding for resources. This is supported by Welsh Government (2016) support this and it details that leaders should develop quality provision that meets the needs of children, parents and the wider community.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS) is designed to assess quality of an environment and pedagogy in social and emotional development domains (Victoria State Government, 2020). Howard et al (2018) further this and support that SSTEWS was developed to assess interactional quality of care in the early years based on developmental theories and research. The scale considers adult and child relationships

taking into consideration planning learning spaces that provide a deeper focus of the role of the adult in quality (Nursery World, 2015).

An important aspect of quality is the relationships that practitioners have with the children they care for (Melhuish, Siraj and Kingston, 2015), this interaction between child and practitioner can help development and learning in the setting. The SSTEWS scale focuses on how practitioners support children's language in thinking, social and emotional well-being (Watch me grow, no date). James (2022) emphasises the importance of interactions between a child and practitioner to the development of language, social and emotional skills. When sustained shared thinking happens it allows practitioners to develop their understanding of children and their continued learning in play and discussions which (Inclusion and Professional Support Program, 2021), in turn, helps improve quality through practitioners knowledge of the individual child and their needs (Better Kid Care, 2016).

The sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing scales are divided into five sub-scales; these are, building trust, confidence and independence, social and emotional well-being, supporting and extending language and communication, supporting learning and critical thinking and assessing learning and language (Hoare, no date). Each sub-scales are given a rating from 1-7, 7 being the highest quality, once each have been scored an average score is calculated (Brodie, 2015).

Howard et al (2018) details that settings score well on this scale if they observed having meaningful interactions with children who they seem to know well. It is clear when a child is familiar and comfortable with a practitioner as they may enjoy discussions and being a part of decision making and planning (Ashford, 2015). By asking children to elaborate or suggesting other ways to do things whilst also respecting their decision making sustained shared thinking is taking place and enhancing the critical thinking of children (Hildebrandt and Musholt, 2020). However, Mackenzie (2016) shares a separate viewpoint and suggests that when observing sustained shared thinking body language is just as important as discussion, highlighting the importance of practitioners being down at child level, giving eye contact, nodding and smiling to convey to the child they are listening to their opinions. Howard et al (2018) suggest that the SSTEWS scale only captures a small scale of what may be actually happening within a setting and therefore does not give a full intensive rating as it is based upon small snippets and observations, therefore questioning validity and reliability (First Discovers, no date).

Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002) found that children benefit well when adults have a warm responsive relationship with them and Patel (2020) state that parents draw comfort from a parent-practitioner relationship and from seeing their child happy and comfortable in the

practitioners presence. National Children's Bureau (2021) state that parents enjoy the notion of practitioners taking part in sustained shared thinking with their child as it allows the child to navigate their learning and be heard in the settings. However, Brodie (2016) argues that parents don't know enough about sustained shared thinking and its benefits to appreciate the SSTEW scale and that it is practitioners jobs to educate parents about the benefits of what they are doing in the setting. An argument against this is put forward by Bryce-Clegg (2018) who suggests that practitioners do sustained shared thinking with children without thinking about it on a daily basis by giving them a voice and helping them to articulate and carry out choice.

Baby Effective Early Learning Programme (BEEL)

Effective Early Learning (EEL) and Baby Effective Early Learning Programme (BEEL) are designed for practitioners to become researchers in their own settings to drive quality improvement through reflective practice (Centre for Research in Early Childhood, no date). Effective Early Learning and Baby Effective Early Learning Programmes are self evaluations for every setting that provides early education and care for children from 0-7 years (Nursery World, 2012). This section will focus on BEEL. BEEL is designed to help practitioners in auditing their practice to support deep-level learning in children and provide a basis for professional development and training (Crosse, 2013).

How it works is that practitioners are provided with training to support Early Years settings to improve their quality of provision by providing them with supported development strategies to use in practice (Centre for Research in Early Childhood, no date), the course is 1 year duration. It originates from Pascal et al (1998) who targeted strategies to early years settings in hopes of improving quality by building on existing skills and expertise of practitioners working with young children.

Effective practice is about ensuring that every child in a setting is receiving optimum benefits from their experiences in the early years (Early Years Matters, 2023). The Early Learning Institute (2022) highlights how practitioners who understand child development can help in facilitating purposeful play to aid in early learning. NSW Government (2022) further develop that practitioners need to understand their purpose in an early years setting and how what they do and say impacts the development of the child. Mason, Fawkes and Knight (2022) detail that when practitioners are underprepared then children are given low quality provision, therefore, praising BEEL as beneficial for practitioners to improve quality.

The BEEL programme allows practitioners to learn deeper about this child development knowledge that they need to support learning in settings (Oecd, 2020). However, Webster (2020) details that practitioners don't need heaps of training to be able to understand children and what they really need is experience and time with children to truly be capable of understanding their needs. IFSEC Global (2012) supports this and details that training lacks substance and is of little importance if it is not paired with experience. Further critiquing this is Nutbrown (2012) who details that research has shown that graduate level practitioners, who have a clear understanding of child development, as leaders has shown huge positive results in areas such as literacy and social development.

A challenge of BEEL is being able to send staff on training as the sector is struggling to recruit and retain staff (Department for Education, 2022). Gaunt (2021) furthers this and details that early years settings are in a hard place at the moment as they are struggling to raise quality due to lack of extra qualified staff to cover for training opportunities, therefore programmes such as BEEL are not being carried out as nursery floor work is needing to be done instead of training. However, Jackson (2022) details that without these training opportunities to raise quality in settings practitioners are unmotivated and uninspired to do their best for the children as they feel a lack of support from higher up in the sector.

Conclusion

Quality provision in early years settings is fundamental to the development and care of children (Foundation Years, no date). Understanding how quality and quality assurance is maintained in the early years is essential to leaders and staff in providing this (Early Years Development, 2018). This assignment has aimed to discuss the tools in which quality assurance and provision can be upheld and maintained. Baby Effective Early Learning programme and Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale both aim towards high quality provision for early years settings. Furthermore, BEEL and SSTEWS are both separate tools to raise quality and propose different things. BEEL proposes training with self evaluation opportunities for practitioners to develop their own practice and own knowledge (Centre for Research in Early Childhood, no date), however lack of time and funding for training may hold back leader setting their staff on training time (Gaunt, 2021). Whereas, SSTEWS proposes an observation of a settings and practitioners based on a scoring system which often only offers a snapshot of genuine authentic practice (Howard et al, 2018).

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