

Reflective Paper

What is quality?

Quality provision is essential in supporting the development and outcomes of young children in early years settings. Education Policy Institute (2018) suggests settings able to provide high quality provision have staff with higher level qualifications and smaller sized classrooms with advantageous and manageable adult to child ratios which encourage children's developmental outcomes. However, Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2015) states it is difficult to determine exactly what 'quality' is in the early years as people have differing views and opinions on what it means. In addition, they go on to say that quality will often look different from setting to setting, as every child requires different care, and all have their very own individual interests and needs (Early Years Careers, 2016a).

In contrast, Hoare (No Date) states an ideal image of quality in early years settings as consisting of adults having warm and responsive relationships with children, purposeful interactions such as sustained shared thinking, clear educational ambitions and qualified staff members. Therefore, it is of importance that practitioners tailor their provision in individual settings to meet the needs of every child and their families, to provide the highest possible quality service in line with articles 3, 12, 28 and 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2019).

It is important to implement high quality provision so practitioners can provide the best opportunities for children to grow and develop to the best of their ability. Williams (2016) explains by bringing together relevant policies and procedures, professionals, continuous development and monitoring – quality assurance can be maintained and enhanced efficiently. The National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2016) is a document provided by the UK government that outlines the very minimum standards expected to be reached by persons in a position of responsibility for children.

In light of this, it is important for settings to ensure that they implement quality assurance measures to give themselves the opportunities to ensure they are providing an accommodating and high quality service at all times in line with Standard 16 of the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2016). Welsh Government (2016) further outlines in standard 18 of the National Minimum Standards that practitioners should have systems in place that allow parents and children's ideas to be considered

to build upon the success and quality of the setting. This allows staff to meet the individual needs of the children in their care, as outlined by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McLeod and Guy-Evans, 2023a).

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is a tool that aims to measure the quality of the early years provisions' environment for two and a half to five year olds (ECERS UK, No Date, A). This scale measures the quality of seven environmental areas including space and furnishings and activities. Clifford *et al.* (2010) supports ECERS UK (No Date, A) by stating it is one of the most used quality scales to help practitioners analyse early years environments to identify areas in need of quality improvement to then encourage better outcomes for children.

As well as the main purpose of the ECERS scale being a benefit in itself towards assessing quality of provision, it is also important to note that the ECERS scale has been further developed by Sylva *et al.* (2004) in the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project to include more of a curriculum focus when using the scale. This has helped to underpin research on the relationship between children's outcomes and provision quality – with the team of the EPPE project creating ECERS-E – to have a more focussed evaluation on areas of education (ECERS UK, No Date, B). This is beneficial as it helps deepen understanding of quality in relation to curriculum and children's education outcomes (ERSI, No Date).

However, it must be acknowledged that this information can be considered out of date, as since the ECERS scale has been introduced into EPPE for education, there is a brand new Curriculum for Wales which began its roll-out in 2022 (Welsh Government, 2021). It should be considered whether the ECERS scale is still valid for assessing environmental quality of learning environments for children, as the new Curriculum for Wales holds a heavy focus on outdoor and hands on learning (Williams, 2022). The ECERS scale does have a small element and focus on 'space and furnishings' but does not specifically have a section concerning outdoor provision. As the new curriculum pushes for more use of outdoor areas for learning where possible, further research by practitioners would be necessary to ensure they are meeting the requirements of the new curriculum and ensure the needs of the children are met regarding quality outdoor provision (Welsh Government, 2014).

Furthermore, the ECERS scales focus mainly on the learning environment. This means that it is rather restrictive and select in regard to holistically assessing the quality of provision. Although this is beneficial in identifying and improving environments for quality, Brunsek *et al.* (2017) points out that it does not consider the ideas and opinions of parents and children. This provides a restricted evaluation, as it focusses solely on one of the many areas in childcare provision that contributes to quality. Early Years Careers (2016b) agrees by stating parent and child feedback is a main component in running a successful setting, and therefore accessing further quality assurance. It is now a legal requirement for all Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) settings to complete a Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS form) (CIW, 2021), which partly ensures settings review how well parent and child voices are listened to which further supports the achievement of quality assurance for settings.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS)

Another tool for assessing the quality of provision and children's outcomes is the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS), which focusses on pedagogical interactions which help support the development of children's ways of thinking (Hoare, No Date). The Yew Chung Education Foundation (2022) supports Hoare (No Date), but further adds it helps to support the building of strong relationships and effective communication, as well as encouraging the unlocking of tools to support the self-regulation of emotions.

Similarly, the SSTEWS scale is comparable to the ECERS scales, as it is also designed with subscales (Hoare, No Date). Practitioners can support children's sustained shared thinking skills by creating resource rich environment's and allowing children to explore it with the purpose of them looking to ask questions (State Government Victoria, 2019). By doing this, adults can help broaden children's ideas, allowing them to converse and share their own thoughts on a concept. This builds and improves relationships with other children and adults, but also encourages communication and language through a good quality learning environment (Brodie, 2014).

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and scaffolding theory supports Brodie (2014) as it explains the importance of an encouraging practitioner behind a child's learning (McLeod and Guy-Evans, 2023b). In addition, they further say the presence of an adult with knowledge beyond that of the learner helps the child achieve and

unlock new information, creating a positive learning cycle and thus, a happy and content child, resulting in good quality learning provision in line with standards 7 and 8 of the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2016).

Foundation Years (2016) supports the above views by explaining that leadership plays a key role in quality improvement. The ECERS and SSTEW scale both allow practitioners to do this, however they may need support in understanding quality measurement tools. Hoare (No Date) explains that not all practitioners may be ready to use such scales, and persons who do wish to use them must have prior knowledge of child development and appropriate practice. Therefore, training for staff must be considered if they are to be effective leaders in using these quality measurement tools and enhancing their own practice.

However, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) uncovered through REPEY that sustained shared thinking approaches do not happen very often in settings. Consistently, they found research to show that settings which carry out sustained shared thinking approaches were considered excellent, compared to those who did not and were graded less favourably. More recent research by Howard *et al.* (2018) supports Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) by stating that there is increasing evidence that high quality communication with children contributes to their extended thinking and development, but there is limited access and understanding in using quality measurement tools such as SSTEW. Nevertheless, Howard *et al.* (2018)'s study showed a strong correlation between ECERS and SSTEW, portraying that they both provide accurate and accessible information to measure the level of quality in settings.

Therefore, practitioners can use the SSTEW scale and other quality enhancement tools to go above and beyond the required minimum standards, to provide an excellent quality provision through accessing quality assurance by tuning in and listening to the needs of the children (Coleyshaw, 2010).

Conclusion

In conclusion, high quality provision in the early years is an essential component to providing children with the best possible start in life and achieving positive outcomes (UNICEF, 2019). As it is difficult to determine exactly what quality looks like (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2015), this should encourage practitioners to go above and beyond

the expectations of the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2016). There are many benefits to using quality assurance methods such as ECERS and SSTEW in early years settings as they provide practitioners with the tools to achieve good quality provision and service. However, it must be noted that the use of a single quality assurance method would not be adequate to improving all areas of quality within a setting. Although they help early years provisions uphold their level of quality, they also have the ability to support them in pushing past and superseding the required National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2016). Therefore, Practitioners must work together in settings to reach the best possible quality provision in the early years.

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