

Quality in early years refers to the standard of care, education and support provided to young children. It encompasses various aspects such as the environment, interactions, curriculum, staff qualifications and family engagement (Readie *et al.*, (2022). According to Moss (2016) quality is a choice and not a necessity. Therefore, it is the priority of each setting to achieve minimum standards and own level of quality that best suits them (Welsh Government, 2023a).

A good quality childcare is regulated for example by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). These settings will need to complete a Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS) a legal requirement and a review of the quality of care provided at the setting annually. Failure to complete by a date indicated may impact future ratings of the setting (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2024). The process involves sending questionnaires to parents and carers for feedback of the service provided, this is then analysed and used to complete the SASS before submitting to CIW. These results allow and helps a flexible approach for providers to develop quality provision for children by identifying strengths and weaknesses in practice and policies. It also allows for practitioners to improve the quality provision and tailor it to the need of children, parents, and local communities. The settings are inspected every three years unless there are changes to structure, such as change of registered staff (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2024).

A good quality childcare consists of different factors which adheres to the guidelines set out in the National Minimum Standards, firstly structural quality, this includes the learning environment, is it fit for purpose, are the staff appropriately qualified and all DBS checked to work with children and are the adult to child ratios correct. Secondly, system quality according to Torri *et al.*, (2017) is where regulatory standards are met and policies and guidelines are followed and updated accordingly, safeguarding is a priority to keep everybody involved safe and lastly process quality where the curriculum offered shows high level of pedagogy to help relationship building to a

high level of care and for children to progress instead of reaching milestones (Welsh Government, 2022).

Good quality early years experiences are important because it lays the foundation for children's lifelong learning, development, and well-being, it can vary for each child as it depends on the environment the child is exposed to (Asbury and Plamin, 2013).

This can benefit in short and long term particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds, where it promotes social skills such as cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution, helping children develop positive relationships with peers and adults (Welsh Government, 2023b).

This can enhance emotional well-being and resilience and break the cycle of poverty (Fox and Geddes, 2016; Taggart *et al.*, 2015; Melhuish *et al.*, 2015). However, the study conducted by Baker-Hemmingham (2014) states staff in effective settings in disadvantaged areas need to be driven in supporting and influencing parents in developing home education environment.

High quality early childhood settings here in Wales follow the guidelines set out in the National Minimum Standards for regulated childcare and the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery. According to Fox and Geddes (2016) the evidence is clear that it can positively impact cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Moreover Melhuish *et al.*, (2015) agrees that it can lead to better academic achievement, improve social skills, and increased likelihood of success later in life but these can only be achieved through the consideration from many factors such as practitioners, parents, and children's input. However, according to Torii *et al.*, (2017) high quality provision is still lacking in many services, especially in settings where interactions with practitioners is low (Tayler *et al.*, 2013; Pianta *et al.*, 2016).

According to European Commission (2020) and Melhuish *et al.*, (2015) improvements in an early year setting takes place when practitioners are supported further in becoming professionals. Staff feel valued and are more effective in identifying improvements, identifying policies and activities which would increase quality and best to support children's learning and development (Pianta *et al.*, 2016).

Quality in early years also includes parents' engagement, Pianta *et al.*, (2016) report suggests transparency offers parents comfort in knowing the environment provided is a safe and nurturing for the child. It helps children to develop essential skills such

as language and social interaction, professional guidance from qualified and experienced practitioners, and incorporating educational activities that prepare children for the transition for school while parents work or pursue other commitments.

It may also allow networking opportunities where parents can connect with other families and build a support network in the community. Overall, investing in a quality early years setting can provide parents with peace of mind that the child is receiving the best support for the child's holistic development and contributing to the child's long-term well-being and future success (Welsh Government, no date),

Some quality assurance schemes appear too rigid that early year practitioners feel they must tailor practice to meet the tick box requirements. However, according to Melhuish, *et al.*, (2015) the Baby Effective Early Learning (BEEL) programme is designed to support practitioners and settings on a quality journey of professional and organisational development. Melhuish, *et al.*, (2014) states that setting who do not take part in such programme's places children at a social and academic disadvantage because BEEL provides a framework based on the best practices and the latest research for early childhood development.

The BEEL programme is based on methods of observations pioneered by Professor Ferre Laevers, his theory is based on the understanding that the most productive learning occurs when a child is so involved with something that the child loses themselves in it and uses the experiential approach (Woods, 2016; MacRae and Jones, 2020).

The BEEL programme is an excellent tool that can be used for quality assessment of the whole setting and includes, practitioners, children, and parents. It allows practitioners to become researchers in own working environment and to promote quality improvements by implementing a cycle of reflective practice based on observations of both adults and children. However. it may cause an increase in workload from gathering and collating the observations needed for evaluating the information, making the process time consuming and sometimes complex (Melhuish, *et al.*, 2016).

Melhuish, *et al.*, (2016) states it is a programme of supporting self-evaluation and improvement in all settings that provide early education and care for young children.

The framework for evaluation is rigorous but flexible and non-judgemental. The intention is to empower and develop practitioners learning and understanding and not to threaten or judge.

The programme provides training and support to settings and practitioners to move beyond baseline national minimum standard. The intention of the programme is to provide a supported development strategy all providers with well-tested systems for ongoing quality improvement. However, Eadie, *et al.*, (2022) study found quality early learning programmes can be costly, making it inaccessible for some settings with limited financial resources to provide the appropriate support. Practitioners can become more confident and articulate about practice due to the programme and the staff team to become more cohesive. However, the heavy workload may have an impact on staff morale as the workload increases.

In the study by Melhuish (2016) when using the BEEL programme children have become more active, empowered, and successful learners. However, Melhuish (2016) also found the programme may overwhelm infants with too much stimulation, potentially leading to stress or development issues. Every child develops at own pace and a rigid program may not cater to individual differences in learning styles and developmental needs (Eadie, *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, Brussoni *et al.*, (2012) suggests excessive focus on structured learning could restrict the child's opportunity for unstructured play which is essential for creativity and social development. This may have an impact on parents when the child is not being stimulated enough and the parents may feel pressured to adhere strictly to the programme guidelines leading to stress and strained adult-child relationships.

The BEEL programme gives an evidence-based approach to quality improvements. It is not a tick box audit but an evaluation of the whole setting, empowering practitioners to take ownership for improvement. It encourages practitioners to engage in critical and reflective thinking about the practice in the setting (Eadie, *et al.*, (2022).

Early Years Wales Quality for All (QfA) is also designed to support childcare settings to provide outstanding quality services. It assists settings in reaching and upholding the highest standards and provides practitioners with the chance to be

acknowledged for the commitment and work that all the staff, make. Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014, p. 122) states this is important to increase performance and to encourage staff to engage in future training. The QfA process is an ongoing cycle of reflection, assessments, and accreditation.

It is a quality assurance programme that satisfies every requirement set out by the Welsh Government for a childcare quality assurance programme in Wales. It provides expert conversations with experienced assessors for advice.

The QfA Assessment Tool is available to purchase online via Early Years Wales. According to the evidence from the study by Asmussen *et al.*, (2016) maintaining a high-quality childcare often requires more resources, which may lead to higher cost for families and the setting, however these programmes are relatively high impact with evidence of improving attachment security, children's early language and reducing child maltreatment.

This scheme supports holistic development, helping each child to reach own personal potential. It promotes active engagement a quality curriculum through hands on activities, exploration and play preparing children ready for school by fostering skills such as literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking as set out in the Our National Mission: High Standards and Aspirations for all report (Welsh Government, 2023).

It is the setting's responsibility to inform the coordinator of any potential issues or difficulties and the Tool must be completed and submitted in 10 months. The process may put pressure on settings to meet the quality standards needed as Early Years Wales reserves the right to withdraw accreditation immediately if these are not met. High expectations for quality may create pressure and stress both for staff and management as compliance often involves extensive paperwork and regulatory requirements which can be burdensome for settings and detract from time spent with the children, this may also affect morale and job satisfaction. However, if staff receive adequate training and support this should reduce the pressure (Welsh Government. 2023).

Therefore, retaining qualified staff who meet the standard of quality childcare can be challenging. Strict adherence to established quality standards such as the QfA tool

may stifle innovation and experimentation in practices hindering the evolution of more effective approaches to early childhood education and care.

The scheme encourages parent involvement fostering a supportive partnership between practitioners and families (Welsh Government, 2023). However, Nolan and Lamb (2019) highlighted, due to the higher cost inflicted to maintain a high-quality childcare it may result some families struggling to access especially those from low-income backgrounds leading to disparities in access and opportunities for some children. Families may also feel pressure to enrol children in high-quality childcare settings, even if it is financially or logistically challenging to do so, leading to stress and anxiety.

This may also make it difficult to accommodate diverse needs of the children and the stringent quality criteria may inadvertently exclude certain children such as those with special needs or behaviour challenges (Nolan and Lamb. 2019).

In conclusion, to achieve a high-quality childcare setting it is crucial to strike a balance between structured and unstructured learning. Consideration is needed to each child's individual needs and ensuring a nurturing and supportive environment for healthy development. Investing in a high-quality early year education prioritises the safety, well-being, and development of each child. Through nurturing environments, qualified staff, engaging activities and strong partnerships with families, children are supported in reaching their full potential. Through continuous assessment, reflection, and improvement this ensure the setting remains dynamic and responsive to the evolving needs of children and families. In a disadvantaged areas this may help break the cycle of poverty by providing children with the foundation needed to succeed academically, social, emotionally, and lifelong success.

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