

Critically reflect on the benefits of additional methods of promoting and ensuring quality above statutory requirements. Critically analyse methods of quality assurance with a focus on two types. These may include official Quality Assurance Marks or research based professional development tools.

Quality in early years settings encompasses various factors that contribute to the overall well-being and development of young children (Burchinal et al., 2010 and Smith, J. & Johnson, L., 2020). It refers to the standards of care, education and nurturing provided to young children. This includes providing a safe and supportive enabling environment, nurturing relationships with caring and qualified staff and promoting positive social interactions. Quality includes fostering children's cognitive and physical development through appropriate activities suitable to each and every child's development that promote holistic growth and learning and offering nutritious meals and snacks. The indoor and outdoor spaces are both clean and stimulating and parents and carers are involved in their child's learning journey (Smith, J. & Johnson, L., 2020)

High quality early years experiences are crucial for laying the foundation for future success in school and life by promoting language skills, literacy, numeracy, and social competence (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013). Furthermore research indicates that children who attend high-quality childcare programs experience long-term benefits including higher educational attainment, improves socio-emotional skills, and better health outcomes throughout their lives. (Campbell et al., 2014 and Vandell et al., 2010)

The importance of quality in early years cannot be overstated. High quality settings provide a nurturing environment that supports a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Sylva et al, 2006). The early years are a critical period for brain development, with neural connections forming rapidly (Burchinal, 2010). Quality experiences during this time, such as responsive early years practitioners and enabling and stimulating environments, help lay down the foundation for lifelong learning and well-being (Gormley et al, 2005)

Quality early years experiences support the development of social and emotional skills, such as empathy, self-regulation and communication, which are vital for

building healthy relationships and navigating life's challenges (Welsh Government, 2022).

Having access to quality early years childcare plays a crucial role in promoting equity and social inclusion, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who may benefit most from high-quality early intervention (Heckman, 2006).

Quality childcare settings provide support and resources for parents, offering guidance on child development, parenting practices, and community resources, therefore promoting positive parent-child relationships and family well-being (FPG Child Development Institute, no date).

Research indicates that children who have access to high-quality early childhood education are more likely to succeed academically, have better social skills, and experience better long-term outcomes in terms of health and well-being. Parents and carers are more likely to feel more confident and satisfied with their child's early education experience when they know they are in a high-quality setting that prioritises their child's well-being and development. Quality early years settings invest in continuous professional development for staff which in turn ensures that the staff are knowledgeable about child development. According to Smith & Johnson (2020) quality can be measured by ongoing evaluation and improvement processes. Effective regulatory frameworks such as the National Minimum Standards (2023) play an important role in establishing and maintaining quality standards in early years settings and childcare. Government agencies and accrediting bodies establish guidelines and regulations to ensure that childcare facilities meet minimum standards of safety, hygiene, staff:child ratios and educational quality (Clarke-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005). Compliance with these regulations is essential in order to provide a foundation for quality assurance in childcare settings.

The qualifications and training of early years practitioners are critical determinants of service quality. Research suggests that staff with higher levels of education and specialised training exhibit greater competency in providing developmentally appropriate care and implementing evidence-based practices (Howes et al., 2008). Continuous professional development programs and opportunities for staff training are essential for updating skills, enhancing knowledge and maintaining high quality standards in childcare provision.

A tool which is used to assess the quality of interactions and emotional support provided to children in early years settings is the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) Scale. It was developed by researchers from the University of Oxford and the SSTEW Scale focuses on two main components which are sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being. It is used to assess and improve the quality of early childhood education and childcare settings.

Sustained Shared Thinking refers to the interactions between adults and children which involve extended, reciprocal, and collaborative engagement in problem-solving, exploration and critical thinking. These interactions promote cognitive development, language skills and social competence in children.

Emotional Well-being encompasses the emotional support and nurturing provided to children within the childcare environment. It includes the creation of a secure, positive and responsive atmosphere that fosters emotional regulation, self-confidence and resilience in children.

The SSTEW Scale consists of multiple dimensions, each assessing different aspects of sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being. These include Adult scaffolding which is the extent to which adults support and extend children's learning through questioning, prompting and providing feedback. Also quality of interactions which looks at the depth and quality of interactions between adults and children including responsiveness, warmth and engagement. Another aspect is emotional support which looks at the provision of nurturing and sensitive care that addresses children's emotional needs and fosters a sense of security and belonging. Also the learning environment is the physical and social environment that facilitates learning, exploration and play promoting children's engagement and well-being.

The SSTEW offers several advantages and disadvantages in assessing the quality of interactions and emotional support provided to children in early childhood settings. The SSTEW Scale provides a comprehensive assessment of both sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being, capturing multiple dimensions of quality in early childhood education and care (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2014). The scale has been developed based on rigorous research and theoretical foundations, ensuring its validity and reliability as a tool for assessing the quality of interactions and emotional support (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). By identifying specific areas of strength and areas for improvement the SSTEW Scale offers valuable guidance for professional development and quality enhancement efforts in early childhood

settings (Taggart et al., 2010). The scale emphasises the importance of promoting positive child outcomes, including cognitive development, social competence and emotional regulation by fostering high-quality interactions and emotional support (Siraj- Blatchford et al., 2014). The SSTEWS Scale is user-friendly and can be easily implemented by practitioners, researchers and policymakers to evaluate and improve the quality of early childhood education and childcare settings.

However, like any other observational tool, the SSTEWS Scale may be subject to the biases and interpretations of the observers, leading to potential variability in ratings across different assessors (Taggart et al., 2010). Conducting assessments using the SSTEWS Scale requires significant time and resources, as observers must thoroughly observe and document interactions within the early childhood settings (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2014).The scale does not fully capture the unique cultural, linguistic and contextual factors that influence interactions and emotional support in diverse early childhood settings, potentially limiting its applicability across different cultural contexts (Siraj-Blatchford, 2014). Adequate training and familiarity with the SSTEWS Scale are essential to ensure accurate and reliable assessments, which may pose challenges for settings and practitioners with limited resources for professional development. The SSTEWS Scale primarily focuses on observable behaviours and interactions, which may not fully capture the underlying processes and dynamics of sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being in early childhood settings. Overall the SSTEWS Scale offers a valuable framework for assessing and improving the quality of early childhood education and care, it is essential to recognise its limitations and consider additional sources of evidence and perspectives when evaluating program quality.

Another tool widely used is the Baby Effective Early Learning (BEEL) framework. The BEEL framework is designed to assess and promote quality in the early years settings, focusing on various aspects of provision and practice that contribute to positive outcomes for young children.

In the learning environment BEEL emphasises the importance of creating a rich and stimulating environment that is conducive to exploration, play and active engagement. This considers the physical layout of the setting, the availability of resources and organising the learning areas to support all children's development. Quality in BEEL involves implementing a developmentally appropriate curriculum that is responsive to children's interests, needs and abilities. This includes the use of

varied and engaging teaching strategies, a variety of engaging teaching strategies, the integration of play-based learning experiences and the provision of opportunities for sustained shared thinking and meaningful interactions.

BEEL encourages early years practitioners to use ongoing assessment to inform their planning and provision, ensuring that learning experiences are tailored to individual children's strengths, interests and areas for development. This includes the use of observational assessment techniques, the documentation of children's learning journeys and the involvement of children and families in the assessment process. Quality is recognised by positive and responsive relationships between children and practitioners together with families and other support networks. This includes fostering a sense of belonging and security, promoting effective communication and collaboration and valuing the diverse backgrounds and experiences for all children and families.

BEEL encourages continuous improvement in early years settings by promoting reflection, self-evaluation and professional development among early years practitioners. This includes engaging in critical reflection on practice, seeking feedback from children, families and staff and actively looking for opportunities for learning and growth. Overall quality in BEEL encompasses a holistic approach to early years education and care and stresses the importance of the well-being, learning and development of young children within supportive and inclusive environments.

There are many advantages of using BEEL in early years settings. BEEL focuses on providing early learning experiences for infants who can support healthy development, stimulate brain growth and establish a strong foundation for future learning (Shonkoff et al, 2012). By involving parents and carers in the learning process, BEEL promotes positive parent-child interactions, strengthens attachment relationships and empowers parents to support their child's development (Powell et al., 2017).

BEEL emphasises a holistic approach to early learning, addressing cognitive, social-emotional, language and physical development through developmentally appropriate activities and experiences. BEEL recognises that each child is unique and the program provides individual support and responsive care that meets the needs and interests of each baby and child fostering a sense of belonging and promoting development (Shonkoff et al, 2012). BEEL takes the setting forward by looking at

what the minimum standards are and improving on what has already been achieved (Bertram & Pascal, 2006). The program also facilitates connections with community resources and services providing families with access to support networks, health services and other resources that contribute to overall well-being. There are also some disadvantages to using BEEL in early years settings. Implementing a high quality early learning program for babies requires significant resources, including trained staff, appropriate materials and equipment and space which some settings may find difficult (Shonkoff et al, 2012). Ensuring that all early years practitioners are adequately trained and supported to implement the program effectively requires ongoing professional development and supervision. Early years practitioners need to be culturally competent and sensitive to diverse backgrounds and the needs of the families participating in the program which may need additional training and support to ensure that the program is inclusive and equitable (Powell et al, 2017). Engaging parents as partners in the learning process requires ongoing communication, collaboration and support which may cause some barriers such as language or literacy. Also maintaining the quality and effectiveness of the program over a period of time may require extra funding to ensure its long-term viability and impact (Shonkoff et al, 2012). Overall while a BEEL has the potential to provide significant benefits for young children and families, it is essential to consider and address potential challenges and limitations to ensure its success and sustainability.

Both SSTEW and BEEL are similar in the advantages and disadvantages, it is more as to which suits a particular setting as to which program to use.

Assessment and monitoring are essential for maintaining quality standards and identifying areas for improvement in childcare provision. Formal assessment tools, such as observational checklists, standardised assessments, and developmental screenings can help evaluate children's progress and identify any developmental concerns (Zaslow et al., 2010). Additionally, feedback mechanisms from parents, staff, and external evaluators provide valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of childcare programs, guiding quality improvement efforts (Cryer et al., 2005). Ensuring quality implementation in childcare requires a multifaceted approach that addresses regulatory compliance, staff qualifications, curriculum design, parental involvement and ongoing assessment mechanisms. By integrating these strategies and considerations into childcare practices, policymakers, providers and stakeholders can create environments that support the optimal development and

well-being of young children. Continued research, collaboration and investment are essential for advancing quality standards in childcare and promoting positive outcomes for future generations.

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