

Reflective Paper

According to Oxford Languages (2025), quality is defined as being “a distinctive attribute or characteristic possessed by someone or something”. Moss (2016) suggests that “quality in early childhood services is a relative concept”. Quality in early childhood is a constructive concept that is personal and developed through nature traits or “based on values, beliefs and interest”, as well as relative and dynamic concepts. Within an early years setting quality care is interlinked with any group amongst stakeholders and outside agencies.

Within an early year’s childcare setting, quality can be viewed differently by various staff members or perceived in a different way, by different opinions and views. However, Cottle, and Alexander (2012) say that the stakeholders involved within a setting can bring quality to the environment as well as the children’s individual lives. These stakeholders include parents, practitioners, and the individual child themselves. According to Eadie, *et al* (2022), quality in early years education and care is contemplated in three domains: structural, process and system. Teach Early Years (2025) mentions that quality in an early year setting begins with the staff and practitioners having great knowledge of child development as they help and support every child’s individual needs, builds secure relationships with children and families as well as providing child-led, open-ended play resources into the children’s learning and play.

As The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project has demonstrated, high-quality provision and care benefits children’s intellectual, social and behavioural development. The EPPE suggests that providing high-quality care and provision within the early years of a child’s life and providing a setting to enhance their development has a significant impact on an individual child’s life, as practitioners and educational staff promote and provide effective, positive outcomes to all.

An early year setting that provides high-quality care and fully qualified staff, who view education and social development as complementary, provides children with higher quality progress, as well as promoting effective pedagogy with instructive learning environments and “sustained shared thinking”, as professionals extend children’s learning (Sylva, *et al* 2004a). However, (Sylva, *et al* 2004b) continue by saying, vulnerable children may still have disadvantage effects on their intellectual and social development as some of these individuals are at risk of having special educational needs due to not attending an early year setting and

having effects of home learning. Nurseries are particularly beneficial to children who are more disadvantaged. As the EPPE shows, “one in three children were ‘at risk’ of developing learning difficulties at the start of pre-school, however this fell to one in five by the time they started school”, after being involved within a nursery or pre-school learning environment. This information suggests that children attending nurseries can have an effective impact on disadvantaged children and a reduction of special education needs can be noticed, especially on children who are vulnerable.

Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) is also a data collection service that demonstrates early years settings have a significant impact on children’s development. According to Siraj-Blatchford, *et al* (2002a) “children who are ‘struggling’ learners receive the most behaviour management interaction from adults”, however, research suggests that these children are often capable learners. REPEY suggests that those children who are learning ‘as expected’ or above, receive more social talk and interactions from practitioners and professionals within their settings. However, according to EEF (2024) “all children are powerful learners”. Education Endowment Foundation believe that before attending an early year setting, some children have already explored and experienced sustained and supportive interactions with adults which promotes their development and learning. However, they continue by suggesting that “children who have experienced fewer sustained and supportive interactions might have shorter attention spans”. As a result of this, it is noticeable that parents and carers have a vital impact on a child’s life. It is important for children to have sustained and supportive interactions with adults from the early years of their lives, however, it is important that as a practitioner, to not assume that this happens to every child as professionals treat all individuals the same, in a way that works and is successful for the child and their individual needs.

Within the text, there are many perceptions around concepts of quality, Vygotsky (1978) promotes that concepts can be drawn from individuals understanding which then becomes “assimilated into our own cognitive structures”. From different perceptions mentioned throughout the guidelines, it is found that practitioners’ perceptions can develop an understanding of the same or different conceptions within a child’s development. The concept of pedagogy provides a scaffolding for learning that has a vital importance for informing instruction within an early year setting. Within Vygotsky’s notion of the ‘zone of proximal development’, it is suggested that everything is achievable with assistance and is

laid beyond individual capability. “This zone varies with culture, society, and experience” but must be “fostered” in joint efforts that develop a context for the child and professional “interaction within a social context” (Siraj-Blatchford, *et al* 2002c).

Within an early year setting, “sustained shared thinking with children is central to effective early years pedagogy”. According to Siraj-Blatchford, *et al* (2002c) and Purdon, (2014), the REPEY study has identified interactions including sustained shared thinking which has a significant impact on the performance in early years settings. “Although the REPEY project consisted of that interactions were characteristics of high-quality settings”, the statement is at doubt within practitioners practice as many individual professionals work in their own unique way with varied training techniques.

According to Siraj, *et al.* (2015), sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing scale (SSTEWS) “is an environment rating scale that can be used for research, self-evaluation and improvement, audit and regulation”. The environment rating scales have been developed to support practice within early years settings for children aged from birth to five years old. The scale has been traditionally based on the notion of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). However, this has been adapted and extended as research continued to develop and improve over time, this has now improved knowledge and understanding of what is considered as effective practice. According to the abstract, sustained shared thinking is the active engagement of practitioners in children’s learning and extended thinking. This has been used in many curricula across the world. The SSTEWS Scale has been implemented by practitioners as well as academics involved in early childhoods research, which is currently being used, daily.

According to Hoare (no date) and Brodie (no date) there are various advantages when using the SSTEWS Scale. For example, the scale improves cognitive skills, enhances language development, boosts social and emotional growth as well as nurtures creativity and problem-solving abilities. As SSTEWS scales build and focus on the pedagogy within the setting, the practitioner’s role in supporting the learning and development considers the high-quality interactions with and between children. It is often noticed within early years settings that the environment or staff may not be prepared for various subscales, particularly those relating to critical thinking, assessment for learning and extending language and communication, however, this is vital as professionals ensure all individual needs are met.

Using the sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing scale does not have to directly used on children themselves. This scale can also become beneficial for practitioners and professionals as they assess their own practice and ensure they are meeting every individual's child's needs.

Brief and Gardiner (2021) agrees with these points and adds, when involving SSTEWS within early years practice it can show the practitioners a reflection on their own practice as well as the children's development. However, they then continue by suggesting from all research conducted and compared to other known scales, "it is notable that items from the SSTEWS scale do not appear among the "best predictor" items". This suggests that as individual practitioners it is important to explore and experiment with different scales before making judgement on one assessment tool as every professional works in a unique way.

However, Howard *et al* (no date) also agrees as they have noticed that the SSTEWS scale is a tool developed to bridge the gap between research and practice and is designed to support educators with all aspects of development and high-quality pedagogy. However, "it is important to determine its association with children's outcomes (in alignment with conceptions of quality in relation to child outcomes; Sylva *et al.*, 2004)". It is perceived that you may need specialist training to use the SSTEWS scale effectively, this may become a challenge for some early years setting due to the funding of educational settings throughout Wales being decreased. This can also become noneffective as practitioners, along with lack of funding, may find it challenging to schedule time into their routine of being present within the environment.

According to Council for Disabled Children (2025), National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) began as a cooperative group of nurseries who came together to share effective and high-quality practice and ideas. As the NDNA began to grow, the award-winning national charity became committed with thriving members across England, Scotland, Wales and internationally. The NDNA are an influential, independent voice of the nursery sector as they help practitioners become confident and have fun with developmental areas for every individual need of the children.

National Day Nurseries Association (2024) suggest that there are several benefits that NDNA can provide for early years settings and professionals within the education sector. Some of these benefits include the NDNA providing their members with over ninety pre-written policies and procedure templates that enables nursery owners and manages to save time and

funding on consult fees. The charity also provides expert advice in preparation of inspection, supports improvement within early years settings, enables practices to become informed, save settings from fees, as well as ensuring all professional voices are heard as they support early years settings effectively and promptly.

NDNA also provide support to communities as they aim to achieve meeting every individual child's needs by providing resources to both children and families to ensure all milestones are met at the best possible standard for the child, as well as providing training for staff to increase the knowledge and understanding of practitioners within the educational sector. NDNA state that their vision is “for all children and families to flourish through high-quality early childhood education and care”, as well as their mission being “to lead and empower the sector so that nurseries and the early years workforce deliver sustainable, high-quality early childhood education and care” (National Day Nurseries Association, 2024).

However, Childcare Online Booking (2025) say that providers and charities like the National Day Nurseries Association are at risk of costs and underfunding which could result in increased fees, reduced establishments or closures of some of the settings in partnership with NDNA. This can put the charity at a disadvantage as they become unable to provide their partnership settings with training, support and a strong voice that is heard. This could also be a challenge as nurseries close due to the underfunding. This could suggest that the charity becomes minute with less settings to support and influence.

The NDNA helps to improve nurseries and early year settings as they raise outcomes for nursery children and support settings to be well-prepared for inspections, “with NDNA's childcare quality and improvement scheme, Quality Counts for nurseries”. The charity will help practitioners and nursery staff to raise positive inspection outcomes and gain skills to embed quality and self-evaluation throughout the environment of the setting (National Day Nurseries Association, 2025).

As early years settings aim to achieve the best possible outcome for babies and young children, it is vital that managers, or setting owners employ a range of extra methods that enhances the children's development and wellbeing. This will help leaders, inside and outside the setting to see the full extent of the working environment, this will help professionals improve and work on the elements of improvement to enable achievement of all goals within the setting, all for staff, children and families. Husbards, and Pearce (2012) and Nursery,

O.A. (2023) agrees as they include, “effective pedagogies involve a range of techniques” as individuals teach, learn and explore in different ways. Pedagogical approaches in early years settings may include a variety of assessment tools, subscales, learning through play and a child-centred approach.

In comparison to both quality methods discussed, there has been a distinctive similarity of both quality tools wanting to support practitioners in meeting every individual child’s needs from the early years of a child’s life. Both tools show their eagerness in improving the quality of pedagogy and putting every child at the centre of all that they aim to achieve. However, as suggested, it is vital for practitioners to experience and explore different techniques and methods, before enhancing one technique that suits every child. It is important for professionals to remember one technique may not benefit every child that attends the setting. High-quality within practice and care is vital to ensure the children within the environment feel safe and happy as every child has the right to an education as they develop a personality, talents and abilities successfully, as well as the interests of the child being a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect them (UNICEF, no date).

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