

A Critical Reflection on Quality Assurance in Early Years Education.

In early years education, quality is not a one size fits all concept. It is an evolving standard that indicates how well each setting addresses the emotional, developmental and educational requirements of all young children. Although regulatory frameworks such as Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) provide a foundation level for safety, welfare and learning, quality tends to arise from particular settings that go above and beyond these minimum standards. These extra layers of quality assurance can help enhance practices, give the support needed to professionals, and ultimately lead to improved outcomes for all children.

I chose to focus on the NDNA's Quality Counts and the SSTEWS Scale because they are both well-known in the early years sector and offer different ways of looking at quality. One focuses more on the overall setting, leadership and improvement, while the other looks closely at how staff and children interact every day. Together, they give a fuller picture of what good quality can look like in practice. This reflective paper explores the concept of the quality within early years and provides a critical analysis of two methods that are designed to surpass the statutory requirements: the NDNA's Quality Counts accreditation and SSTEWS (Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being) Scale. By comparing their principles, processes, and impacts, this paper will consider the advantages, implications and challenges when implementing these methods into daily practise.

The quality of early childhood education has been extensively documented in research and is a significant factor that help influence outcomes for children. For instance, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project (Sylva, et al. no date) states that children who participate in high-quality early year programmes show signs of enhanced cognitive, social and emotional growth. This growth can positively impact their educational paths and opportunities later on in life. Providing high-quality resources aids in school readiness, boosts language skills and fosters emotional resilience. Recent studies have emphasised the importance of these resources in assisting families and preparing children for school, in particular their social-emotional growth (Bierman, et al. 2023). It is crucial that any inequalities are diminished, by providing children from less well-off backgrounds the same chances to grow and learn as those from more privileged families. As discussed in Uddin (2023), disadvantaged minority children frequently encounter obstacles and cultural issues

that can hinder their access to quality education. High quality early years settings can help bridge these gaps by offering inclusive settings and acknowledging the importance of social identity, culture and readiness for education. Quality within the early year's education extends beyond child development. It also effects the environment they and practitioners spend their time in. This quality influences staff morale, helps to build the parent's trust, and helps to enhance the settings ongoing improvement. Hetherington, Haley & Spence (2023) state that wellness and confidence in leadership are essential when promoting change while supporting culture. When early years settings follow these key principles, staff motivation can increase, communication with parents improve, and settings are able to address challenges while upholding high standards. Therefor, quality assurance is crucial not only for accountability but also for fostering authentic growth and innovation.

NDNA Quality Counts

The NDNA (National Day Nurseries Association) Quality Counts initiative is a nationally acknowledged quality assurance programme that is aimed at helping early years settings to excel beyond their legal requirements. In Wales, NDNA Cymru has been instrumental when customising support for Welsh early years settings by offering bilingual materials, training that is specific to the region, and effort to help align with the Welsh Governments goals for early childhood education (NDNA Cymru, 2024). This includes support from the Curriculum for Wales as well as guidance on well-being, leadership and inclusive practice and the four purposes (Curriculum for Wales, 2019). The NDNA process involves a thorough self-assessment, external review, and a framework for ongoing improvement that encompasses all areas of practise. These include leadership, safeguarding responsibilities, learning and development, staff well-being and involvement of parents/ guardians. It is structured to help early years settings strive for excellence beyond their legal responsibilities. Participating in this scheme requires the setting to engage in thorough self-reflection within their practice, implement action development plans, and provide proof of high-quality services. Unlike the statutory Estyn inspections in Wales, which mainly focuses on compliance to regulatory standards (Gov.Wales, 2023), NDNA's framework promotes continuous reflection and a forward-thinking approach. If successful, it is awarded for a three-year period and acknowledges the settings dedication to best practice (Argile, 2023).

One benefit of the NDNA Quality Counts is its ability to enhance continuous professional development. It encourages staff to participate in training and engage in reflective conversations, supports leadership growth, and fosters a strong team ethos centred around improvement. Moreover, it boosts parental trust, as families can observe a clear dedication to quality and safety. Nevertheless, the initiative has its drawbacks. The process can demand many resources and may pose challenges for settings that are underfunded or short staffed, especially when time and training resources are already limited. According to Penn (2011), quality assurance programmes can inadvertently impose extra pressures, especially on smaller or resource- limited environments that may have difficulty fulfilling extensive requirements while handling daily requirements. Smaller or rural areas might struggle to allocate staff for reflective meetings or to compile evidence that is needed to meet the criteria. Additionally, if the team does not fully commit to the process, it risks being a ‘tick-box’ exercise, particularly if it is only done to meet parental expectations. Nutbrown (2012) emphasises that genuine quality improvement doesn’t happen just by ticking boxes, it has a need for strong leadership and a team that can regularly reflect on how they work. When the NDNA scheme is taken seriously by early years settings and is used to guide real changes, it can help build an environment where everyone is working together to improve. Moreover, this process can help staff members feel they are a bigger part of the team and supported in their continuous professional growth.

By comparison, the SSTEWS Scale is an observational tool grounded in research (Howard, et al. 2018), aimed at evaluating the quality of interactions between adults and children, as well as the emotional atmosphere within early years environments. It emphasises five essential domains: fostering trust and confidence, promoting social and emotional well-being, enhancing language and communication, facilitating learning and critical thinking, and evaluating learning and language development. In contrast to broad quality assurance programs, SSTEWS places a strong emphasis on pedagogy and the relational aspects of practice. It offers an organised framework to observe and reflect on sustained shared thinking, which involves adults and children working as a team through dialogue and interaction (Huang, 2023). SSTEWS is frequently utilised by professionals to facilitate reflective practice and pinpoints opportunities for improvement. Melhuish (2015) explains that it fosters significant professional development by prompting staff to reflect on how their engagements affect

children's cognitive development, self-assurance and emotional control. Featherbe (2020) furthers this, stating it tackles quality elements that may not always receive emphasis during official evaluations, which include emotional health and language depth.

While SSTEWS offers many advantages, there are a few limitations. One major challenge is the requirement for training and collaboration. For leaders and practitioners to use the tool effectively, they must develop a shared understanding of the indicators and scoring system, which can be a time-consuming process. Insufficient training may result in inaccurate evaluations, reducing the reliability. Additionally, some staff members might find the process overly evaluative, especially if they are not used to being observed in such detail. This discomfort may lead to anxiety or defensiveness, potentially obstructing the reflective discussions that the tool is intended to promote. Alongside this, some practitioners may find the process impractical within fast paced settings. Waters and MacDonald (2020) examined the application of SSTEWS within a local authority within Wales and found that while staff members initially felt uncertain when being observed, many eventually appreciated the scale's framework for fostering reflection and improvement. They emphasised the importance of ongoing support and dialogue to ensure that the tool was used constructively rather than a form of judgement. Nevertheless, its strength lies in its ability to promote meaningful improvement in pedagogy, particularly when paired with training and collaborative reflection. Waters and MacDonald (2020) also observed that embedding the scale within continuous learning encouraged staff members to have a deeper understanding of teaching strategies and emotional well-being.

NDNA and the SSTEWS Scale are two unique yet complementary methods for ensuring quality. NDNA examines the overall environment, including leadership and improvements. And aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model by acknowledging how broader systems and relationships influence a child's growth (Hayes, O'Toole & Halpenny, 2022). In contrast, the SSTEWS Scale concentrates on immediate interactions between adults and children. This approach resonates with Vygotsky's theory of learning, emphasising social interaction (Alharbi, 2023) and scaffolding through sustained shared thinking. While NDNA aids settings in achieving recognition and accountability to external organisations, SSTEWS gives practitioners the tools that are needed to reflect on their daily teaching and emotional support. One provides a broad external validation, while the other encourages in-depth internal

reflection. Together, they help link strategic planning with the real experiences of children and practitioners. This combination fosters a robust organisational culture with meaningful interactions that can enhance a child's development at every stage.

In conclusion, both the NDNA Quality Counts and the SSTEWS Scale offer useful ways to improve quality in early years settings beyond just following the basic rules. They each have their own strengths — NDNA supports whole-setting development and leadership, while SSTEWS helps staff reflect on their daily practice and interactions with children. Even though both come with some challenges, they can make a big difference when used properly. They help settings aim higher, support staff growth, and give children better learning experiences. By using quality assurance tools like these, early years settings can keep learning, improving, and offering the best care and education for all children.

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