

When using the term 'quality' in relation to the Early Years it is described as a convoluted term. This appears to be because the term quality varies from people to people. In countries across the world different methods of measuring quality in Early Years settings are used. Therefore, it can be difficult to compare each country's quality in their setting unless they use a similar method of assessing quality (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016, p. 28). It is essential for practitioners to self-assess their work to see what areas are working well and what need to be improved upon, and set out a clear plan of action to tackle any areas of improvement. This is the practitioner's responsibility, as set out in the guidance on completing the quality care review (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2019). According to Section 16 of The Child Minding And Day Care (Wales) Regulations 2010 and section 18.1 and 18.2 of the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to the age of 12 years (Welsh Government, 2016), a setting must complete an annual review and the information noted in a report and the stakeholders views must also be noted.

An effective setting is one where a child, despite a child's background contributors, develops and attains a higher level of learning and development than what was predicted for them (Department of Education, 2015). Children who have access to high-quality care and education have better developmental outcomes (Hyson and Tomlinson, 2014, p. 33; Teager and Bonetti, 2018; Welsh Government, no date). Furthermore, if this high level of quality is introduced at an early stage, for example in the infant and the pre-school stage it leads to a much higher levels of development and better prepares these children for when they begin their schooling. However, if high-quality childcare is experienced in only the infancy stage or only the pre-school stage then the level of developmental outcomes drops. If low-quality care is experienced in both the infancy stage and the pre-school age then the child will show low levels of development and be less prepared for the transition to school (Li, *et al.*, 2013, p. 1440). This is why high-quality childcare is very important, in particular to children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they are predisposed to having low outcomes (Buckingham, Beaman and Wheldall, 2014, p. 428).

When parents are researching the best school, nursery or school setting to send their child, they are able to use published reports by ESTYN or CIW to determine the level of quality the setting provides. However, parents are able to personally go and view settings to determine for themselves what type of care they can provide. Important

factors such as whether or not the parent has a gut instinct or feels that they can trust the practitioners is vital information for parents that they are unable to get from published reports. Waldegrave (2013, p. 29) suggests that this is more important than any published findings.

As mentioned earlier, there are many different methods to measure quality assurance. Some that concentrate on measuring the quality levels in the learning environment and some that focus on other aspects, such as teaching quality and ratios. Rentzou and Sakellariou (2013, p. 301) states that all relevant stakeholders' views should be considered when evaluating the quality of the care and education and emphasises the importance of using various methods to measure the quality that is provided by a setting. Settings can then use the findings to assess which areas they need to improve to provide a higher quality provision. But also, which areas they excel in and already provide high quality provision within the setting.

One method is the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). This method of measuring quality assurance is used to help evaluate a space or learning area. It is measured using a scale that consists of 35 areas, and these are then sorted under 6 subscales: Space and furnishings (indoor space, child-related display, privacy, furnishings for play, learning and care, the room arrangement, gross motor activities and equipment), Personal care routines (meals and snacks, toileting, hand washing, safety practices), Language and literacy (expanding children's vocabularies, supporting children's language, practitioner's use of books with the children, how they encourage children to use the books and familiarising with the print), Learning activities (Art, blocks, fine motor, music, dramatic play, math incorporated into daily routine, math activities, nature, use of technology, accepting diversity and understanding written numbers), Interaction (Discipline, interaction with other children, interaction between staff and children, differentiate within teaching and learning and observing gross motor skills) and Programme structure (free play, entire group activities and transition times throughout the day) (Environment Rating Scale, no date). By diving it up into different areas it enables the assessor to focus in-depth on various areas.

When looking at the quality in an early years setting there are two types to consider. Firstly, there is the process quality. The process quality refers to all interactions that

happen throughout the day between the children, practitioners, the parents and families. Process quality takes into consideration the safety of the child, their overall health and their well-being. Process quality also includes the activities and materials that children engage with throughout the day. Structural quality however is more about the environment that the child is in. It considers the teachers' qualifications, area and size of the learning space, class size and ratios within the setting. All these areas are what define the structural quality. Both process and structural quality are thought to be interlinked. When both are of high quality, together they provide the highest quality learning experiences to children (Peterson and Elam, 2021).

ECERS is used the world over, this makes it easier to compare quality assurance between countries. However, Garvis *et al.* (2018, p. 591) states that ECERS needs to be adapted to suit different cultures as not all countries share the same views or have different curriculums and aims for their children. Nonetheless, Garvis *et al.* (2018, p. 591) suggests that if the countries were to adapt the ECER to better suit their country's curriculum or culture then the results would become aimless as the ECER would lose its continuity used for comparing countries, rendering it an unfair comparison.

Zachopoulou *et al.* (2013, p. 4218) conducted research that involved six countries in Europe; Greece, Portugal, Finland, Denmark, Cyprus and Romania and compared the findings of each country's ECER results. Rather than comparing every finding, the researchers concentrated on the Process quality which was the 'Space and Furnishings' and the 'Personal Care Routine' of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The results of which showed the similarities and the differences of each country and their culture. Zachopoulou *et al.* (2013, p. 4218) states that these findings can be used to help the United Nations when they set targets and values.

When comparing the ECER results of ECEC settings in the United States of America and those of Japan, Fujisawa, Fukai and Nakamuro (2023, p. 15) found that Japanese nursery centres appeared to fair better in the 'Personal Care Routines' and the 'Interactions'. This could be down to a difference in culture. However, Japan appeared to struggle with the area of 'Learning Activities'. Fujisawa, Fukai and Nakamuro (2023, p. 15) states that this could be down to the Nursery Centre's Childcare Guidelines that Japanese nursery centres must adhere to.

Another method of assessing quality provision in early years settings is the Leuven Scale. It allows practitioners to measure a child's involvement in an activity and also their well-being using a five-point scale. The more engaged a child is to an activity, the higher quality of provision the child is receiving. Children develop and are better engaged with their learning when they are happy, confident and emotionally healthy, therefore it is essential to measure this area of a child's development (Learning Journals, 2023; Arnerich, 2021). The Leuven Scale has been used since the 1980's but has become increasingly popular amongst practitioners in the United Kingdom to assess what level of involvement children display whilst participating in a particular task by making observations, therefore gauging the quality in their setting. Level five being the highest level of quality in the setting (McRae and Jones, 2023, p. 234). It measures level of involvement and the well-being of a child during a particular task. A rating of one would indicate 'low activity', level two; frequently interrupted activity, level three; mainly continuous activity, level four; continuous activity with intense moments and the level five which indicates sustained intense activity. It is at this level that the child is able to develop and learn the most effectively. A child or group of children can be assessed for 2 minutes during an activity before a score is obtained. If the score is three or less then it is thought that the child will be limited to what he or she can learn. It may be necessary to take action to assess the learning area or activity to enhance the quality of provision. Changing the areas of the classroom where activities are set up is one way that can help achieve this (Lewis, 2020).

Whilst the Leuven Scale can be used as an effective method of quality assurance Rebecca and Evans (2018) believe that it is now being used to score children's well-being instead of being used as a method of assessing quality provision. Furthermore, Storli and Sandseter (2019, p. 75) found that the results of the Leuven Scale were vastly different when children were involved in free play as opposed to structured time. Therefore, comparing the results of settings using the Leuven Scale can be aimless if one setting assessed during free play, where the children would naturally score higher than those of a setting that assessed during a more structured activity. Therefore, similar activities or learning areas should be assessed in each setting's assessment.

While the Leuven Scale is completed in a matter of minutes, ECERS can take hours, typically three, but preferably more, to assess a learning environment followed by

scoring the environment. ECERS are typically assessed alongside the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale (North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project, 2023).

The Leuven Scale assess the activity or environment by looking at how engaged the child is and their well-being whilst doing the activity or engaging in the environment. Whereas ECERS assess the environment and what the environment has to offer, not specifically how children engage in it or how effective it is. The Leuven Scale measures the process quality of a setting, whereas ECERS measure the structural quality of a setting. Therefore, both methods of quality assurance can be used together to gain an understanding of what the level of quality is in that setting.

Both methods of quality assurance are used the world over. Every method of quality assurance can be used to assess various areas, therefore it is recommended that multiple methods are used to gain a more accurate, overall assessment of quality.

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