

Leadership and Management for Systems of Quality

Quality, according to Moss (2016) is referred to as a choice, not a necessity. Practitioners must continuously work to a certain standard to ensure they not only maintain the quality of the setting, but go above and beyond it (Williams, 2016). Quality in a childcare setting can be defined as providing a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment that supports children's holistic development (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), No date). According to Welsh Government (2014), this involves having well-trained practitioners who are attentive and caring towards children, whilst also choosing to be committed to continued professional development. In addition, it is considered important to have positive relationships between practitioners and children, fostering a sense of trust and security (Cottle and Alexander, 2012; Essa and Burnham, 2020). Furthermore, a good quality childcare setting should also have engaging educational activities and resources that are age appropriate (Arthur *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, Rodd (2020) states a key indicator of quality involves providing a safe and clean environment that meets health and safety standards. Cottle and Alexander (2014) support this and add that good quality involves open and effective communication between practitioners and parents to ensure the child's needs are being met.

According to Williams (2016) quality assurance is what the setting does to achieve good quality. This involves statutory requirements such as the collection of policies, procedures, systems and practices that are designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality (Williams, 2016; Eadie *et al.*, 2022). However, the focus in this paper will be on quality enhancement, which is what the setting does to go above and beyond to continually improve the quality of their setting (Moss, 2016). Williams (2016) states that it is a process of augmentation or improvement.

According to Moss (2016) good quality may look different to each individual; therefore, it may be hard to measure what good quality looks like. One thing that is evident is the importance of providing good quality care and provision within a childcare setting (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2022). According to Bakken, Brown and Downing (2017) and Sylva *et al.* (2004) when a child attends a high-quality setting this can positively impact on their holistic development, social skills and

overall well-being. Similarly, Taggart *et al.* (2015) considers it important that a setting is of high-quality, ensuring the children can receive the best care and support for their growth and development.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project which is a European longitudinal study took place to investigate the effects of pre-school education on children's development from the ages of three to seven (Sylva *et al.*, 2004). One of the main points this study looked at was the quality of the pre-school settings the children attended and the effects this had on them (Sylva *et al.* 2004). According to Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) and Taggart *et al.* (2015) the findings of this study show that high-quality pre-school education was proven to have a positive impact on children's intellectual and social/behavioural development. In addition, this study emphasized the benefits of early intervention and support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds when attending a pre-school, as they were provided with a better start to school (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004). Furthermore, Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) state that these findings had a considerable impact on government policy. Reducing social exclusion and breaking cycles of disadvantage could come as a result of investing in more high-quality pre-school provision (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004).

The EPPE project also highlighted the importance of factors such as, stimulating and engaging learning environments, practitioner – child ratios and practitioner qualifications (Sylva *et al.*, 2004). It was found that settings that had higher qualified practitioners resulted in their children making more progress, setting them up for better educational outcomes (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Morgan, 2019). Upon reflection of the findings from the EPPE project Morgan (2019) and Sierens *et al.* (2020) believe it is evident the impact quality pre-school education has on children's development and has highlighted why it is important that all children are provided with this opportunity in line with article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, no date).

According to Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) although it is widely acknowledged that good quality pre-school provision has direct benefits on children's development, there was need to study the pedagogical methods in practice that supports the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable children to make a good

start at school. Therefore, an extension of the EPPE project was developed called Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004). According to Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) the REPEY study researched 'what does high-quality look like?' and how it was differentiated from 'good' quality. The study focused on identifying effective teaching practices and explore the impact of these practices on children's learning outcomes and development during their early years (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, the aim here was to share their findings with educators, policy makers and other stakeholders within early years education to promote effective teaching pedagogies (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004). As a result, Wall, Litjens and Taguma (2015) suggest that children will have access to the highest quality provision, providing them with better long-term educational and social outcomes.

According to Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) one of the findings from the REPEY study was that settings where children made the most progress, were settings where more sustained shared thinking was observed. This research informed knowledge proved that the quality of adult-child verbal interaction has a lasting impact on children's development (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004).

There are methods and tools in which practitioners can use to ensure they reach beyond quality assurance within their settings. The first tool that will be explored is the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS), which is a scale that assesses the environmental provision and the interactions between practitioners and children (Harms, Cryer and Clifford, no date). According to La Paro, Williamson and Hatfield (2014), these experiences for young children directly affect their broad developmental milestones, such as their language, physical, social and emotional development. In addition, ITERS is used to assess personal care routines, language and literacy and programme structure (Harms, Cryer and Clifford, no date). Furthermore, Bjornestad and Os (2018) state that ITERS provides practitioners with a framework for improving the quality.

Some of the criteria within the subscales of ITERS advise that all activities within the environment are supportive of children's interests and schemas (Harms, Cryer and Clifford, no date). In addition, that practitioner's model, support and extend children's learning and help to challenge and support the ability to problem solve with the

children (Harms, Cryer and Clifford, no date). Blocker (2020) suggests that this will help to drive the quality of the interactions and experiences for these children, in turn promoting their curiosity and development.

According to Kaarby and Tandberg (2018), the ITERS score a setting will receive is based solely on three hours of observations, with no practitioner interviews.

Therefore, it is down to the individual perception of the scorer on what they choose to observe (Kaarby and Tandberg, 2018). Similarly, Barros and Leal (2015) states that unless the scorer witnesses an interaction when observing, which could be something that they miss, they simply cannot tick it on the score sheet. In addition, The University of North Carolina (no date) suggests a flaw of ITERS is that the scoring system can be viewed as complicated, with a true reflection of the setting and the interactions that take place within cannot be observed within just three hours. On the other hand, according to Bjornestad, Baustad and Alvestad (2019) ITERS is a useful tool to assess the provision in the environment regarding the health and safety of the children, and whether the provision offers appropriate stimulation through language and activities. Similarly, Kinkead-Clark (2022) states that ITERS is useful to ensure that environments for infants and toddlers are safe, stimulating, and supportive of their development.

Another advantage of the ITERS according to Vermeer *et al.* (2016) is by evaluating these areas against the seven-point scale, with the score of seven being the goal as this shows the setting has met all of the necessary criteria, settings can identify specific areas that may need adjustments to enhance the quality of care provided to the young children. Similarly, Eckhardt and Egert (2020) believes the way the 39 items were organized into seven subcategories was a helpful way to clearly define what the tool was assessing.

However, Leseman and Slot (2020) suggest there is a disadvantage to using ITERS, this scale may not consider the social development and emotional well-being of the children within that setting. Furthermore, ITERS focusses on the physical environment, therefore it may overlook certain aspects of a child's holistic growth and development, not allowing for a true reflection of the quality of that setting (Leseman and Slot, 2020).

Another tool that can be used to measure quality is called the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) scale (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). This scale is aimed at assessing the quality provision for two-five year olds (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). According to Howard *et al.* (2018) much like the ITES scale, the SSTEWS scale is a tool used in early years settings to assess the quality of interactions between practitioners and children. While the ITES focusses on assessing the physical environment, the SSTEWS scale focuses specifically on sustained shared thinking (SST) and emotional well-being during their interactions (Hoare, no date). Much like the ITES, the SSTEWS scale is assessed using a seven-point scale.

Hoare (no date) places emphasis on practitioners being qualified and having knowledge of child development and appropriate practice as essential. Similarly, PACEY (2017) considers it vital that for a setting to be classed as high-quality then the practitioners' qualifications must meet a certain standard. As a result, they will be better equipped to engage in high-quality interactions with the children, to achieve SST (Iles, 2019).

Wieduwilt, Lehl and Anders (2023) are supportive of the SSTEWS scale, suggesting that it is a good way to assess the quality of the interactions between the practitioners and children. Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2023) state that the scale focuses on promoting critical thinking, problem solving and emotional well-being among children, which helps to ensure a positive environment that supports children's learning and development. Similarly, Iles (2019) suggests that the SSTEWS scale helps to enhance emotional well-being by promoting positive interactions and supporting children's emotional development. Furthermore, the focus is on creating a nurturing environment that fosters emotional connections between practitioners and children, which helps to develop a sense of security, trust and overall well-being for children (Hayes and Filipovic, 2017). In addition, Purdon (2016) supports this by adding that emphasizing SST helps to build strong emotional foundations and promote healthy emotional development.

Although it is widely acknowledged that the SSTEWS scale is an effective tool to use in the early years, Howard *et al.* (2018) believes that there may be some challenges to using this tool. One potential disadvantage of using this scale is that it will likely

require a lot of additional time and effort from a practitioner to observe, assess and implement strategies to improve SST and emotional well-being in their setting (Waters and MacDonald, 2022). Gealy *et al.* (2022) agrees, suggesting that this could be challenging in busy environments where practitioners already have multiple responsibilities to manage.

Another disadvantage that can be considered for both the ITERS and SSTEWS according to Moss (2016) is the individual conducting the observation and scoring's perception of what good quality looks like. Rodd (2020) agrees and states that good quality may look different in different settings or to different individuals, therefore, how does that individual give a fair score. However, Melhuish, Siraj and Kingston (2015) suggest that the individual who will be evaluating and scoring a setting must be experienced and well-trained, who follow's the established criteria and guidelines of the tools to give a fair and transparent score.

In conclusion, high-quality provision is considered vital by Welsh Government (2023) to ensure the acquisition of children's social skills, academic achievements, emotional stability and independence to explore. According to Welsh Government (2023a), standard 18 of the National Minimum Standards state that childcare settings must have effective quality assurance measures and policies in place, that are maintained, to ensure that children and their families are benefiting from high-quality service. Although challenges may arise when using quality assurance tools such as the ITERS and SSTEWS scales, there is evidence that they are effective methods to drive and enhance quality experiences and positive outcomes for children (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023; Harms, Cryer and Clifford, no date). With the effective use of SST, as emphasized in the SSTEWS scale, this supports the Welsh Government's core aims that children are listened to and treated with respect in line with articles 12, 13 and 14 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, no date). Furthermore, Melhuish, Siraj and Kingston (2015) suggest both scales should only be used by professionals with in-depth knowledge and understanding of child development, to boost the quality of the setting and encourage children's holistic development.

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