

Part 2: Reflection

Welsh Government (2024) discusses children's rights to high quality play and learning opportunities as the brain development of children within the first 1000 days is documented as being rapid and good quality provision enables children to have the best start to their lives. This is supported by Boo, Dormal and Weber (2019) who state the importance of relationships and interactions within this period to encourage children to form attachments. Moreover, Welsh Government (2023a), Welsh Government (2023b) and Hui *et al.* (2017) acknowledge the importance of the environment regarding the progress of children within the setting. Mayer and Beckh (2016) and Hui *et al.* (2017) acknowledge the link between quality provision and the development of children. Donaldson (2015) discusses the relationship between quality education and the future prosperity of the country. This is also supported by Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) who suggest that quality early years settings, which support child development, will support the economy of the country as the children in these settings grow into and become healthy, confident individuals and creative contributors in their adulthood and reach their full potential. Additionally, the links between good quality teaching pedagogy and children's learning, which includes teacher's theoretical knowledge of child development and practical skills to excite and inspire children to problem solve and investigate, are discussed (Donaldson, 2015). However, Moss (2016), Howard *et al.* (2020) and Tanner, Welsh and Lewis (2006) discuss the difficulties in defining quality and state that there is room for subjectivity and opinion in defining quality and to some extent there will be personal choice. In support of this, Senedd Research (2019) states that quality is difficult to define and often depends on the individual perceptions of the stakeholders. This may be supported by the lack of definition of quality found in the glossary of 'A Quality Framework for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care in Wales' (Welsh Government, 2023a). Welsh Government (2014) state the need for reform of the quality systems in place for assessing maintained and non-maintained settings, to create a 'single quality framework' to acknowledge the learning that takes place in childcare settings and the care which takes place in the education settings, ensuring that nothing is missed during the inspection process and provide clear national standardised requirements for all. Furthermore, Welsh Government (2014) highlights the disparity in quality dependent on area and sector and different quality frameworks implemented within settings and suggests that the 'single quality framework' offers clear guidelines with flexibility to recognise the varying contexts of settings. Moreover, Moss (2016) states the differing contexts that settings find themselves in and the uniqueness of each setting's situation makes it difficult to define quality and argues that quality can be decided based on the current political agenda or policy. This is further supported by the findings of Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) who state that it is possible for government quality criteria to become stale and outdated unless the criteria is reviewed frequently. As a result, Welsh Government (2024) discusses the development of the joint inspection framework by CIW and Estyn. With that being said, as part of section 16 of The Childminding and Daycare (Wales) Regulations 2010 settings are required to undertake a quality of care review each year, which takes into consideration the views of the parents, children and practitioners of the setting. Moreover, section 17 ensures that settings are

inspected and meet the minimum standards as set out in the National Minimum Standards for Regulated childcare for children up to the age of 12 years (Welsh Government, 2023d). Additionally, Estyn (no date) sets out an inspection framework to assess settings which provide education to 3 to 4-year-olds within six themes, in order for inspectors to make a judgement on the provision on offer. Moreover, guidance such as Welsh Government (2023a) discusses the importance of quality provision within the early years for children to reach their highest potential. This guidance suggests that principles which offer quality provision to children include having their rights embedded in the settings practice, while planning for holistic child development opportunities and being supportive of children's daily transitions. Additionally, settings should encourage practitioners to be reflective, encourage professional development and the use of quality assurance tools with leadership and management guidance in place to enable these processes (Welsh Government 2014, Welsh Government 2023a). However, the practitioner's workload was identified as a barrier to practitioners being able to find time to reflect effectively (Aubrey, 2011). Continuous professional development is also identified within Welsh Government (2017b) as necessary to ensure that practitioners continue to meet the best practices for their role as well as to motivate and upskill practitioners. Additionally, this is identified as a key to developing education reform in Wales by raising standards and encouraging practitioners to improve their skills (Welsh Government, 2016; Donaldson, 2015). Moreover, the importance of professional development and research opportunities is highlighted as an enabling objective to curriculum reform within Welsh Government (2017a). OECD (2017) discusses the government in Wales striving to improve the since 2011, stating that progress has been made so far to improve the sharing of best practice through collaboration and to improve the participation in reflective practice and professional learning, beginning with the reform of the initial teacher training programmes.

The use of quality assurance tools is suggested as a way of driving quality within Welsh Government (2014) and Welsh Government (2023c) as this states that quality cannot be improved by solely relying on inspections. This is due to the time that passes between inspections, the length of which does not allow for regular reflection and informing the settings where improvements may be needed. Also, Welsh Government (2014) found that settings which regularly undertook quality assurance received a higher outcome at inspection, which may be due to more frequent reflections. However, the stakeholders around childhood education and care can have different priorities when defining quality; parents placing high regard to their children's happiness within settings whereas government prioritise parents returning to the workforce (Howard *et al.*, 2020). Senedd Research (2019) states that quality assurance tools such as Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) indicate process quality, for example relationships between adults and children. ECERS is an environment rating scale which measures the process quality including relationships and connections between the adults and the children within the setting and engagement (ERS, no date; Howard *et al.*, 2020). Environment rating scales evaluate whether settings are providing children with engaging experiences in effective environments with enabling adults (Burchinal, 2018). These three enablers are identified as quality pedagogical approaches within Welsh

Government (2023b) therefore, assessing whether these are evident in practice could inform future steps needed to improve practice. Moreover, La Paro *et al.* (2012) state that ECERS is an evaluation of the environments in which children aged 2 and a half to 5 years old are cared for and that the scale covers structural quality as well as process quality. Howard *et al.* (2020) state that structural quality will include the settings meeting ratios and the practitioner's level of qualifications which are often details that are regulated. There are six subscales that measure 35 items from the surroundings to interactions (ERS, no date). La Paro *et al.* (2012) goes on to say that the breadth of factors covered in the ECERS scale has caused it to be used extensively across the childcare profession. This is also supported by Bukhalenkova, Almazova and Aslanova (2023) who state that the ECERS scale contains a broad range of indicators to provide a thorough review of structural and process quality of a setting. This information is gathered through observations and ECERS3 does not require information from settings staff, but via observation (Howard *et al.* 2020). However, Fujimoto *et al.* (2018) caution that using ECERS to review quality does not necessarily raise the outcomes of children and Peterson and Elam (2023) caution that ECERS does not allow for context of the settings in assessing quality. That is, ECERS assesses items that may not be available to a setting within a deprived area and so the setting may be given a low-quality score, despite offering the best provision possible to the children that attend. Additional criticism of the ECERS is noted within Welsh Assembly Government (2019) and Peterson and Elam (2023) which argues that ECERS may not involve parents and their local community. Cottle and Alexander (2014) suggest that an important factor to reach 'quality' within childcare is the relationships built with families, coming to a shared view of child development, which Cottle and Alexander (2014) agree is difficult to achieve with policy and guidance pulling practitioners in different directions. However, Cottle and Alexander (2014) suggest that this can be supported by practitioners who participate in reflective practices and continuous professional development. This is supported by Welsh Government (2024) who states that settings should encourage parents to better understand child development and direct parents to support systems. Additionally, La Paro *et al.* (2012) found that despite using the ECERS tool to measure quality, much of the research available shows that the settings using the scale were defining quality differently, and so suggests it would be difficult to use findings from the ECERS assessment to inform policy changes to improve practice. Peterson and Elam (2023) noted that ECERS does not allow for thorough assessment of the setting and practitioner's ability to form relationships and engage in meaningful interactions with the children. With this in mind, it is noted that during a study Bukhalenkova, Almazova and Aslanova (2023) found that using more than one tool for quality assurance offered the most objective data in regard to breadth of information. This is also supported by Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) who acknowledge that the sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing (SSTEWS) scale is similar in format to ECERS and suggests that settings complete a SSTEWS scale alongside an environment rating scale. This allows for a more rounded view of settings quality, which enables settings to evaluate and reflect to improve practice more widely. The SSTEWS scale is a self-assessment scale to be used within settings for children aged between 2 and 5 to assess the quality of well-being, emotional regulation, self-expression and

interactions including collaborative play; moreover, the SSTEW scale informs settings of their ability to engage children in sustained shared thinking (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). Hadfield, Jopling and Needham (2015) state that sustained shared thinking is the process whereby scaffolding learning and discussions are offered in order that children extend their own learning with practitioner using open-ended questions and speculation to ignite wonder. Additionally, Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) acknowledge the need for highly trained and qualified staff who have a deep understanding of child development, in order to support sustained shared thinking, as they will need to know how each child learns and their developmental stage to inform their next steps to progress. Howard *et al.* (2020) states that the SSTEW scale places higher value on interactions than the value given within ECERS as interactions, relationships and engagement is a thread found throughout the SSTEW scale, however only evident in the higher criteria on ECERS scale. Furthermore, Howard *et al.* (2020) continues to argue that ECERS shows disregard for the importance of interactions within lower quality settings. However, in contrast, Mayer and Beckh (2016) state that the SSTEW scale encourages practitioners to be mindful of reciprocal relationships with the children, coming to know them and their cultural backgrounds, likes and dislikes as well as abilities. However, Waters and Macdonald (2022) discuss the potential for inaccuracy of scoring when using externally audited quality assurance tools, such as the SSTEW scale, Practitioners may feel intimidated by the presence of a stranger, and this may negatively affect the practice which is monitored. It would therefore be necessary to ensure practitioners are at ease with the process to get a clear, accurate view of the settings practices. However, in contrast Boo, Dormal and Weber (2019) recognise that assessments can lead to more accurate data collection than the use of practitioner reflective tools, as they may be subject to unconscious bias of the practitioner.

It is evident that quality in the early years has positive outcomes on children's development, and therefore, despite some caution and criticism, practitioners and settings should be encouraged to use quality assurance tools to inform the settings of improvements required as well as evidence the good practice demonstrated. This information can be used to identify practitioner training and development needs (Aubrey, 2011) and improve outcomes for the children. It can be said that, despite the noted similarities between the ECERS and SSTEW scales, by using both tools together, settings would gain a more rounded view of process and structural quality of their settings.

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