

Quality is defined as a 'degree of standard of excellence' according to the English Dictionary (2023) and it is recognized that people view the term quality in early years provision in different ways and value the aspects of provision differently according to Penn (2011). Whilst Plantega (2011) states that a number of parent or carers values and compares the setting to the perceived happiness of children as they would be as if they were at home, whereas others who offer quality early years provision such as policymakers often concentrates on the settings capacity to help and support parents, particularly mothers back into work (West *et al*, 2010, Welsh Government, 2017 & Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016). Meanwhile research done by Cottle & Alexander (2012) focused on what quality meant to practitioners. Some enclosed that through reflection and continuing questioning it is a developmental progress. In another study, practitioners regarded parent partnership as an essential attribute of 'quality' in relation to their work with children and their families with many feeling that without them having positive relationships sustaining a quality provision was impossible (Cottle & Alexander 2014). Kingston *et al* (2013) agree and through their study states that having parental involvement gives a positive impact to a child's education and achievement. In Early years, quality provision is vital for the effective development of young children (Welsh Government, 2013 & Teach Early years, 2023). However, there is no one definition of quality as there are numerous ways of leading quality in the early years provision says Barr & Leeson (2016). Whilst Teach Early Years (2023) & OEOD (2012) agrees and states that defining it is a challenge as it can be a very individual concept based on the practitioners training, experience, and pedagogy. Quality provision starts in the flying start programme in Wales, where the high-quality part time childcare provision for 2 – 3-year-olds is classed as essential states Welsh Government (2014) as it supports the benefit to children's social, emotional and behavioural development and strives to be the standard for quality childcare in Wales as they then transition to the Foundation Phase. This is in accordance with the UNCRC where every child has the right to experience high quality early years provision.

Research suggests from the EPPE study (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education) that a child who experiences high quality provision in early years enhances their mathematical, language and reading skills as well as a reduction in aggressive behaviour (Sylva *et al*, 2014). Data from research also provides evidence

that skills acquired in these provisions are pivotal to the positive academic and lifelong achievements gained at GCSE level, specifically Maths and English (Sylva *et al*, 2014 & Sammons *et al*, 2014). Therefore, it is of importance that settings and practitioners strive for quality in the early years to be able to support children to have their 'best start in life' as held by Welsh Government (2022a). With Campbell-Barr & Leeson (2016) stating how investment in the Early Years is viewed as an asset in the future for children as ones who develop well, as adults will be successful and less likely to receive state benefits. Hence those from disadvantaged backgrounds gain from excellent quality early years provision. This paper will be analysing the effectiveness of quality assurance methods used to promote quality as ongoing research suggests the significance of providing high quality provision within the early years settings.

Williams (2016) describes quality assurance as a collection of procedure systems and policies of an organization which is designed to achieve, maintain, and improve quality. Siraj *et al* (2015) is more specific and states that quality assurance is a process through shared knowledge, being reflective, sharing best practice and knowledge and measuring. However, monitoring systems are often criticised as they can make quality early years provision seem static and objective (Campbell-Barr & Leeson 2016). Whilst some practitioners expressed their disappointment at the expectations and targets required which they found conflicted with their own professional values and found it inappropriate as they considered quality would progress as they put their professional views to practice through having positive and warm relationships with children (Cottle & Alexander 2012). Regulation systems are just one view of quality with practitioners and parents favouring the emotional contributes of quality rather than those evident in official assessments according to Campbell-Barr (2016). The National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government 2016) states that to ensure children are gaining from receiving quality early years provision, effective quality assurance measures are to be put in place.

There are a variety of ways and tools used to measure quality. From supervisions and appraisals, peer observations and monitoring progress to getting feedback and views from children and parents which enables the practitioners to provide a more holistic approach to all aspects of the provision (Teach Early Years, 2023).

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS) scale is an observational tool used in early education for 2 – 5 yr old provision to assess practice supporting the development of problem solving, task focus and imagination states Siraj *et al* (2015) who goes on to say that the scale supports 2 developmental areas in children: cognitive development and social and emotional development though it does not support the outdated understanding of a child's development where they are expected to develop in the 'same' way but to develop in a more individual holistic way. Tying in with the Welsh Government (2022b) and Birth to five matters (2021), which says that the curriculum recognises that every child is unique and supports a more holistic approach in learning. The scale involves scoring observed practice against a set of criteria in each of five subscales and then scored from a 1- 7. Scoring a 7 would be evidence of an excellent provision (Sylva *et al*, 2014). The scale focusses on pedagogy within the setting and looks at the high-quality interactions with and between children (Howard *et al*, 2018 & Hoare, no date). The five subscales can be linked to the areas in the new curriculum including social and well-being, language, communication, and literacy skills (Welsh Government, 2018). Sustained shared thinking was discovered in the REPEY project where the quality of interactions was discovered (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2002). Research acknowledges the importance of high-quality interactions that support and extend children's thinking (Howard *et al*, 2018). Also in research, though staffing and responses as being central to quality, being caring and empathetic is just as important as achieving qualifications according to Georgeson *et al* (2014). To support sustained shared thinking with children, staff need to be aware of the child's interests and understanding as they work together to develop ideas and skills says (Hoare, no date). National research has favoured the view that interactions of sustained shared thinking support how a child thinks and are key in supporting a child's language, communication, thinking and learning and are vital to practice for the learning and development of the child to make progress (Planta, 2012 & Sylva *et al*, 2014). Being able to engage in sustained shared thinking with a child in pre school settings is recognised as a key skill of the staff (Siraj *et al*, 2015). The scores of the SSTEWS scale need to signify a general professional opinion of staff behaviours, interactions and responses and the experiences the children have had within the setting are discussed and where the practitioner has an opportunity to further their professional development as they help to build the child's confidence,

trust and independence whilst supporting their critical thinking and learning skills and encompasses their social and emotional wellbeing suggests Hoard (no date).

Research from Waters & McDonald (2020) looked at the SSTEWS scale as a driver for professional learning and 23 practitioners said that their provision improved as a result and referred to using language differently as they introduced more vocabulary to the children whilst they thought about questioning and wondering out loud. The research also found that some staff had innate, natural pedagogical skills when using the scale. However, some responses from the same research showed that some children may not be 'ready' as some were described as 'from deprived areas and may have speech and language delays'. If this is the case, in accordance with (Welsh Government, 2017) the workforce plan recognises that where practitioners can see that a child needs support, they will be able to do a referral to the relevant services. Thus, enabling practitioners to work more closely with multi agencies (Teach Early Years, 2017). However, Waters & McDonald (2020) says that careful consideration of how to use audit tools such as the SSTEWS scale in professional learning, making sure that reflective, engaged, and professional learning is evident rather than the tendency to work towards performativity. Howard *et al* (2018), suggests that further research is needed to study the strengths of the SSTEWS scale.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is a global and established assessment focusing on the quality of the classroom environment and educational curricula (Howard *et al*, 2018 & Brunsek, 2017). From the findings of the EPPSE research, the scale measures a more structural aspect to improvements of quality of children's development and progress (Howard *et al*, 2018 & Ecers. No date). Items on the ECER scale contain 18 elements which combine to create subscales including diversity, literacy, maths, environment and science explains Howard *et al* (2018). Brunsek *et al* (2017) describes the variety of qualities being assessed that influence the classroom environment to guide quality improvement as teach- child interactions, teaching practices, curriculum, and the environment. With all items rated on a 7-point scale which is the same as the SSTEWS scale. Howard *et al* (2018) states how each element is rated from 1 to 7 with 7 being an excellent result. Again, just like the SSTEWS scale. Being derived from a one-day observation and using a balance of judgements. A study by Brunsek (2017) found that the ECER scale obtained views of the environment that are vital to child development. However,

according to Ecers (no date), there is a greater debate in the UK where a small number of properties of the ECERS (and other scales), mostly in the way that the supervision of children is assessed. For example, a child's need for privacy must be balanced as the scales consider that children should be always in view of an adult to be 'safe.' Every child has the right to privacy states UNICEF (no date). The benefits of using the ECERS scale is that as the environment is being observed, support will be provided where necessary and where leadership has not been established, for example, or how the existing quality of provision may be developed. Cottle & Alexander (2012) did research on the views of early years practitioners, and some said that quality provision was impossible without positive relationships based on shared values, mutual trust, and a shared purpose. Another benefit is that the scales are helpful in that reflective discussions that take place will help facilitate the development of the leaders in the practice. With many practitioners in the Cottle & Alexander (2012) study stating that they found quality to be something that develops and evolves as they put their professional morals into practice. Howard et al (2018) did a study comparing ratings on the ECER and SSTEW scales and looked at the impact of the interactional quality on child development and the varying curricular aspects. Results also showed from the study that critical thinking and learning was supported as well as helping the children to expand communication and language skills. The study also found that more consistency was observed relating to the SSTEW scale regarding numeracy development than ECERS suggesting that quality sustained shared thinking used by the practitioners made more predictions of children's numeracy compared to the aspects of the educational curriculum measured by ECERS (Howard *et al*, 2018). However, though quality of provision is improved from scales such as ECERS, Hadfield (2015) states that from research, they were used by some as accountability tools by the leaders of the provision rather than building up potential professional learning of the other practitioners at the setting and goes on to say that as they were used in a mechanistic way. Feedback to staff resulted in them not necessarily understanding how to improve the practice. Welsh Government (2017) tells us that practitioners, through knowledge skills and behaviours can have a profound impact on children. Emphasizing that the importance of high-quality childcare produces high quality early education.

To conclude, it is important for young children to have access to high quality settings. Whilst quality can have different perspectives, every child has the right to experience quality provision where they can develop and thrive in all areas of development. With a setting having parent partnerships or practitioners developing their professional skills, it all plays a part to achieving quality in the early years. With the use of quality assurance tools such as the SSTEW and ECERS scales, they are continuing to be effective in improving positive outcomes and quality experiences for children.

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