Hsu, Kalesnik and Kose (2019) suggest that quality can be measured using a variety of tools and indicators combined to demonstrate scales and levels of attainment, however, quality as a subject can often lack a commonly accepted definition, similarly, Rudoe (2020) suggests that quality, when viewed from an early years perspective, can also be a complex topic and hard to define and measure. The Welsh Government (2023a) sets out the minimum standards of care expected of childminders and childcare providers, however, it does state that high quality early years provision goes beyond basic expectations, encouraging practitioners to continually reflect and improve settings for children and their families. The *Education Act 1996* similarly sets out statutory requirements and responsibilities for all schools which has been outlined in the early years' outcomes framework (2015) covering self-assessment, improvement and accountability.

Any setting registered with the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) is required to submit, annually, a Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS) and a review of the quality of care in accordance with *The Childminding and Day Care (Wales) Regulations 2010.* The report covers four principal areas including child well-being, care and development, environment and leadership and management (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2021). The CIW will carry out inspections utilising information within the SASS, the quality of care report and other sources of information with the aim of supporting providers to improve in each of the four principal areas whilst ensuring the voice of the care users are heard (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2024).

Schools and nursery settings that receive government funding will be inspected by Estyn under the legislation set out in the *Education Act 2005* ensuring that Welsh Parliament is informed on the quality of education in schools (Estyn, 2022). An Estyn inspection aims to improve learners' experiences considering the cultural and diverse needs of each setting through listening to learners' views and the opinions of practitioners and sharing good practice across Wales (Estyn, 2024a). Inspectors will look at educational standards achieved, if the needs of learners are met, the quality of the leadership, the spiritual, moral, cultural development and wellbeing of pupils and healthy eating provisions (Estyn, 2024b).

It is widely accepted that high quality care in the early years is beneficial to a child's cognitive, social and emotional development and that the quality of the experiences during these early years can a have lifelong impact on a child (Ipsos Mori Report, 2020, Fraley, Roisman and Haltigan, 2013 and Save the Children, 2016). Eadie (2022) and MacDonald, Gealy and Tinney (2019) similarly believe that quality interactions and experiences in the early years can have beneficial outcomes particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and, with an average of between 15% and 28% of children living in relative poverty across different areas of Wales (Department for Work and Pensions, 2024), high quality early years provision is gaining greater support through government funds such as the childcare and early years capital programme (Welsh Government, 2023b), however, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024) suggests that the disparity between outcomes and levels of poverty are not clear as, according to PISA test results, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in England score the same as the average pupil in Wales.

The Effective Pre-school Primary and Secondary Education project (2015) similarly suggests that the quality of early years childcare provision has long term effects for children, improving GCSE outcomes, indicating that quality early years experiences

may be linked with improved social skills and lower levels of hyperactivity (Department for Education, 2015), however, Wales has received its lowest PISA scores recorded in 2022 (Welsh Government, 2023c) and the Institute of Fiscal Studies (2024) suggests that the new curriculum in Wales, which looks to offer a broader view of education, may result in lower employment, increasing teacher workload and may limit further education possibilities.

Moss (2016) argues that quality is a choice and not a necessity suggesting that practitioners should be the driving force in improving quality in childcare provision to ensure that the services they provide go beyond those set out in the national minimum standards (Welsh Government, 2023a). What tools then, can early years practitioners and childcare providers utilise to measure and demonstrate quality in their settings to ensure that all children receive high quality experiences during those crucial years of development? Experiences that go beyond the criteria set out by experts such as Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) and Estyn.

The new curriculum in Wales contains policies and procedures aimed at ensuring that quality can be consistently applied across Wales. Inconsistency of quality of provisions was highlighted in the independent stocktake of the foundation phase in Wales (Welsh Government, 2014), however, under the new curriculum in Wales, every school in Wales is expected to write their own curriculum, implement their own policies and define their own priorities (Welsh Government, 2024) which means that the new curriculum for the early years is open to interpretation. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2020) suggested that practitioners may interpret guidance differently leading to inconsistency in quality. Practitioners are also expected to tailor their curriculum to local priorities (Welsh Government, 2022b) which will differ from area to area. How do settings ensure that they are providing quality services in line with the new curriculum that meet CIW and Estyn expectations?

Practitioners may choose to use an environmental rating scale to assess and improve quality within a setting through scoring the quality of the environment and the quality of the interactions between children and staff, for example, using the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEW) tool or they may utilise the Effective Early Learning (EEL) and Baby Effective Early Learning (BEEL) approach to measure a child's involvement in their learning.

The EEL and BEEL approach are an evaluation and improvement initiative that suggests that children who experience rich, stimulating learning environments will experience higher levels of involvement and engagement in their learning which should lead to better learning outcomes (Pascal et al. 1998). Similarly, SSTEW is described as a tool used as a means of assessing and improving on children's interactions with the environment and the people surrounding them (Howard *et al.* 2020 and Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). How then, can practitioners demonstrate to the CIW or Estyn that the quality assurance tools they use go beyond minimum standards and improve children's learning experiences within their settings?

The EEL and BEEL initiatives aim to improve early childcare provision through training practitioners to become researchers within their own settings through

carrying out child and adult observations (Centre for Research in Early Childhood, no date). The BEEL approach suggests a three-step method to improving quality through assessing children's interactions with their environment, firstly the context, the aspects that define the environment, secondly, the process, including the child's and adults' interaction and finally, the outcome demonstrating the child progression (Pascal and Bertram, 2019). BEEL aims to address the first two in order to enhance the third, however, the project has focused on the process rather than the outcomes as there may be a cultural bias on results and that the emphasis should be on a child's disposition to learn rather than the results (Pascal et al. 1998), this links to the areas that are assessed by both the CIW and Estyn, looking at children's wellbeing, environment and the practitioners understanding of their role (Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales, no date and Estyn, 2023).

The EEL and BEEL approach aim to include everybody in the assessment and improvement of quality within the early years Practitioners, children and their families are encouraged to take a more humanist approach to how children learn within the early years through improving their environment, their experiences, and their interactions with those who surround them (Bertram and Pascal, 2006). The new curriculum in Wales also encourages settings to involve parents, carers and the community surrounding the child to improve learning outcomes for children (Welsh Government, 2022a and Welsh Government, 2022c), the EEL and BEEL approach could be applied to the new curriculum's schools as learning organisations ethos and demonstrate the level of community involvement and how that affects a childs involvement in their learning (Welsh Government, 2022c)..

The BEEL process focuses in on children between birth and three years, it utilises self-supported evaluation whereby practitioners, children and parents all have an input into the measurement and analysis of a child's involvement and an input on how to improve services (Pascal and Bertram, 2006). The BEEL programme suggests that it is a time efficient method of quality assurance that enables settings to provide services that strive to continually improve through allowing children to become co-constructors of their learning, adopting a praxeological approach to a child's learning, ensuring that practitioners reflect on and in practice ensuring they understand where a child sits developmentally and how they can support their next steps (Pascal and Bertram, 2019). The new curriculum in Wales emphasises the need for authentic environments and well-trained enabling adults who can adapt settings and allow the child to take the lead on what they learn and how they choose to learn (Welsh Government, 2022), theorists such as Vygotsky also suggest that children learn from their interactions with peers and adults and that the quality of these interactions will affect the amount of child involvement (Eun, 2019).

The SSTEW, EEL and BEEL approach are similar in that they aim to improve the environment and interactions that a child experiences, however, SSTEW focuses in on providing more frequent, higher-level interactions between the child and the adults and peers that surround them, the practitioners are there to support and scaffold a child's learning to a higher level through conversation and working together (Howard *et al.* 2020). The concept of Sustained Shared Thinking involves two or more people working together to solve a problem, clarifying a concept or extending a narrative, all parties must contribute to the thinking and extend and develop the activity or idea (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). SSTEW is also designed to be used as a research, self-evaluation and improvement tool (Victorian Government, 2024). The new curriculum in Wales similarly suggests that the role of

the enabling adult is a principal factor to achieving the best outcomes for children (Welsh Government, 2022a), the new curriculum suggests that the role of the enabling adult is to understand child development, be able to plan in the moment, adapt activities and settings as needed and to build trusting relationships with the children they support and their families (Welsh Government, 2022a).

The SSTEW scales also highlight the need for practitioners to understand when to stand back and observe and when to provide assistance in collaboration with children (Tower Hamlets, no date). There are five subscales within the SSTEW scale and each aims to measure the quality through carrying out observations on areas, interactions and how well staff respond to and know their children (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015), this again builds on Vygotsky's zone of Proximal Development theory (Eun, 2019) which links to the new curriculum in Wales' ethos of building up trusting relationships with the child and their families to understand where a child sit developmentally and how to support them in taking their next steps (Welsh Government, 2022a).

Both the EEL, BEEL approach and the SSTEW approach have many elements that link to the new curriculum in Wales through encouraging practitioners to provide the engaging experiences and the authentic environments through becoming well trained, enabling adults, however, MacDonald, Gealy and Tinney (2019) and Howard *et al.* (2020) suggest that practitioners need to be trained in SSTEW techniques before indications of improvements on the SSTEW scale were evident. Similarly, Bertram and Pascal (2006) suggest that practitioners should attend EEL and BEEL training courses to aid practitioners understanding and accreditation before standards can be raised.

Oner obstacle to carrying out extensive and intensive training is that ensuring safe ratios are maintained within settings for staff to be released for training (Welsh Government, 2023a), this isn't always possible for settings where budgets may be restrictive (Cottle and Alexander, 2012) and many childcare settings struggle to maintain staff as pay is low across the sector and a joined-up approach to training isn't always visible as suggested by the foundation phase stocktake (Welsh Government, 2014). So, how do practitioners ensure that the quality assurance tools, whichever they choose to utilise, effectively demonstrates to CIW and Estyn the level of quality provided?

There are a host of tools that settings or schools may decide to utilise to ensure that the care and quality of a provision and education is at the highest possible, it is suggested, however, that the term quality in itself is open to interpretation. Tools such as EEL, BEEL and SSTEW aim to provide a consistent language of quality and definition of levels of quality. They do this through ensuring that practitioners have the knowledge and indicators needed to be reflective, adaptive and enabling adults capable of supporting and developing the nation's youngest people at a critical stage in life, the early years. Funding restrictions may affect training opportunities for staff, however, CIW and Estyn both aim to improve the wellbeing of all children through supporting the development and continual improvement of settings and schools.

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