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Critically Reflecting on the Benefits of Additional Methods of Promoting and Ensuring Quality Above Statutory Requirements

In early years settings, Slot (2018) states that quality is fundamental to ensuring that children receive the best start in life. Quality in this context refers not only to the standards of care provided (Burchinal, 2018) but also to the overall experience children have within the setting, which according to Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory impacts their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. (Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny, 2022). Moreover, Egert, Fukkink, and Eckhardt (2018) maintain that high-quality early years provision is widely recognised as essential in fostering school readiness and supporting long-term educational outcomes. Furthermore, Yoshikawa, *et al.* (2019) assert that the importance of ensuring quality provision for young children is highlighted by several pieces of research that point to the positive impact of high-quality early childhood education on children's development. Therefore, as maintained by Butler (2025) it is essential that early years settings go beyond the statutory minimum standards established by regulatory bodies such as the Care Inspectorate Wales to ensure optimal outcomes for children.

While statutory requirements provide a baseline for service delivery, Peckham (2020) continues by arguing that additional methods of quality assurance can significantly enhance the provision. Moreover, these methods offer a framework for settings to strive for continuous improvement, align with best practice, and demonstrate commitment to excellence (Haslip and Gullo, 2018). This reflective piece will critically analyse two prominent methods of quality assurance used in early years settings: the Early Years Wales Quality Mark (Early Years Wales, 2020) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being scale (Early Years Matters, 2020) as both of these approaches go beyond statutory requirements and focus on promoting quality that enhances child outcomes.

The Early Years Wales Quality Mark

The Early Years Wales Quality Mark (formerly the Wales Pre-school Providers Association – WPPA) is an official accreditation system designed to recognise and promote high-quality early years provision (Early Years Wales, 2020). This framework is aimed at ensuring that settings meet best practice standards and actively improve their services to support children's development. The Early Years Wales Quality Mark is built upon key criteria that include effective leadership, curriculum delivery, staff qualifications, engagement with families, and a commitment to continuous improvement (Early Years Wales, 2020).

Rigorous Self-Assessment and Reflection

According to Ulferts, Wolf, and Anders (2019) the process of applying for and maintaining the Early Years Wales Quality Mark requires settings to undergo self-assessment, a reflective process that fosters ongoing improvement, where settings are encouraged to critically evaluate their curriculum delivery, learning environment, and childcare practices, identifying areas where improvements can be made. Yurtseven and Altun (2018) maintain this by stating that self-reflection promotes a cycle of continuous improvement that is central to maintaining high standards.

Professional Development and Support

Egert, Fukkink, and Eckhardt (2018) state that settings that participate in the Early Years Wales Quality Mark are offered access to a wide range of professional development resources and training opportunities. Furthermore Zepeda (2019) maintains that an investment in professional development ensures that staff are knowledgeable about the latest research, pedagogical practices, and policy changes. Moreover, Pascal, Bertram, and Rouse (2019) argue that this enhances the overall quality of care and learning, aligning the setting with both national and international best practices.

Community Engagement

Epstein (2018) indicates that the accreditation process emphasises the importance of building strong partnerships with parents, families, and the wider community. Consequently, Smith and Sheridan (2019) argue that settings gain valuable feedback and strengthen relationships with families, which in turn can positively impact the children's development.

Criticisms of the Early Years Wales Quality Mark

By contrast, some researchers challenge the viewpoint that the Early Years Wales Quality Mark offers numerous benefits where Roberts-Holmes (2018) states that there are challenges associated with its implementation. For example, the process of achieving and maintaining the quality mark requires considerable time and resources, which may be a challenge for smaller settings or those with fewer staff. This perspective is further validated by Fairman, *et al.* (2022) who claim that the focus on continuous professional development may also place additional pressures on staff, particularly when resources are limited. Additionally, Peterson, *et al.* (2018) assert that the assessment criteria may be seen as too rigid for some settings, which may feel constrained in their ability to innovate or tailor their approaches to meet the unique needs of the children they serve.

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) Scale

According to, Howard *et al.* (2018) the SSTEWS scale is another valuable tool for promoting quality in early years settings. Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023) support this by arguing that this framework specifically focuses on the interactions between adults and children, emphasising the importance of shared thinking, emotional support, and sensitive caregiving in fostering positive child outcomes. Additionally, Waters and MacDonald (2020) state that the SSTEWS scale encourages settings to reflect on their practices and provides a structured framework for improving the quality of interactions between staff and children.

Enhancing Child-Staff Interactions

Kruty, *et al.* (2021) insist that the core benefit of the SSTEWS scale lies in its focus on sustained shared thinking, which Huang (2023) insists is essential for supporting children's cognitive and social development. Schachter, Gerde, and Hatton-Bowers (2019) continue by arguing that this emphasises the importance of high-quality interactions, where staff are encouraged to engage in meaningful dialogue with children, ask open-ended questions, and encourage children to express their thoughts and ideas. Accordingly, Housman, Denham, and Cabral (2018) maintain that this approach helps develop children's language skills, problem-solving abilities, and emotional regulation.

Promoting Emotional Well-being

As stated by Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023) the SSTEWS scale goes beyond the development of cognitive skills by emphasising the importance of emotional well-being. Therefore, as Reardon, Reed, and Wilson (2018) argue it encourages settings to create an environment where children feel emotionally secure and supported, which is critical for their overall development. Research by Butler, *et al.* (2022) has shown that children who feel safe and emotionally supported are more likely to engage in learning and form positive relationships with peers and adults. Therefore, by focusing on emotional well-being, Waters and MacDonald (2020) argue that the SSTEWS scale ensures that the developmental needs of the child are met holistically.

Professional Development for Staff

Research conducted by Wieduwilt, Lehl, and Anders (2023) show that the SSTEWS scale provides a reflective tool for staff to evaluate and improve their practice, where the framework encourages practitioners to critically reflect on their own interactions with children, which O'Reilly, Devitt, and Hayes (2022) maintain ensures that their approach supports the development of critical thinking and emotional intelligence in children. Furthermore, as argued by Zepeda (2019), this ongoing reflection and self-assessment is an essential component of professional growth and leads to sustained improvements in practice.

Criticisms of the SSTEW Scale

However, it is crucial to recognise that there are limitations to the SSTEW scale as Howard *et al.* (2018) show that it places considerable responsibility on staff to continuously monitor and adjust their interactions with children. Moreover, Butler (2025) maintains that for staff members who are already occupied with multiple duties, this can be overwhelming. Additionally, Florian and Beaton (2017) state the scale's focus on interpersonal interactions may be less applicable to settings that deal with large groups of children, where staff may find it difficult to engage in sustained shared thinking with every child. Furthermore, Huang (2023) maintains that the SSTEW scale may not fully address the broader environmental and structural factors that influence the quality of care, such as the physical space, resources, and staffing levels.

How the Early Years Wales Quality Mark and SSTEW Scale Drive Quality Above Minimum Requirements

Continuous Improvement and Reflective Practice

According to Early Years Wales (2020) the Early Years Wales Quality Mark encourages settings to engage in a continuous self-assessment process. Furthermore, Alzahrani, Alharbi, and Alodwani (2019) maintain that while statutory regulations require settings to meet minimum safety and care standards, the Quality Mark framework requires settings to regularly evaluate their practices and identify areas of strength and areas in need of improvement. This therefore promotes a culture of reflective practice, where settings are encouraged to proactively address challenges and incorporate best practices into their daily routines, as argued by Pascal, Bertram, and Rouse (2019). However, this contrasts with the minimum standards approach, where Schmoker (2018) insists that settings may only meet the basic requirements but fail to critically engage with ongoing improvements.

According to Jeynes (2018) through self-assessment, settings look at not only compliance but quality outcomes, for instance, evaluating how well their curriculum supports child development, how effectively they engage with parents, and how they can improve leadership practices. This reflects the view that high-quality provision is not static but evolves based on thoughtful reflection and feedback, as maintained by Allen, *et al.* (2019).

Focus on Professional Development

Unlike statutory requirements, which Pascal, Bertram, and Rouse (2019) insist may set basic qualifications or ratios for staff, Sahlin (2023) states the Quality Mark emphasises continuous

professional development for all staff. Therefore, Wood (2019) insists that settings participating in this framework are encouraged to ensure that staff engage in regular training to stay up to date with current educational research, legislation changes, and best practices. Therefore, Allen, *et al.* (2019) claim that by placing an emphasis on lifelong learning, the Quality Mark helps ensure that settings consistently improve the skills and competencies of staff, enhancing the overall quality of the care and education provided. Moreover, Appova and Arbaugh (2018) argue that the focus on continuous professional development drives a cycle of improvement that exceeds minimum requirements, ensuring staff maintain and enhance their ability to meet the diverse needs of children in their care.

Inclusive and Holistic Approach

As suggested by Early Years Wales (2020) the Early Years Wales Quality Mark goes beyond the statutory obligation to offer a safe and supportive environment for children by encouraging settings to adopt a holistic approach to children's development. Furthermore, Alzahrani, Alharbi, and Alodwani (2019) insist that this includes focusing on children's emotional, cognitive, and social development and ensuring that the setting is inclusive for children with additional learning needs. Moreover, as insisted by Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018), settings are encouraged to create environments where children of all abilities feel valued, which might include making adjustments to physical spaces or adopting specialised teaching methods. To illustrate this point, this is a clear example of how the Quality Mark drives provision above and beyond the statutory minimum requirements, which may not always fully address the complexities of inclusivity and diverse developmental needs (Bendinia and Devercelli, 2022).

Parent and Community Engagement

While Espinosa, *et al.* (2020) argue that regulatory bodies require settings to engage with parents to ensure that their children's needs are met, Pascal, Bertram, and Rouse (2019) state that the Quality Mark encourages a deeper level of involvement from parents and the wider community, where Epstein, *et al.* (2018) continue by stating that settings are expected to establish meaningful partnerships with parents through regular feedback, family workshops, and opportunities for families to be involved in the setting's development.

Conclusion

Both the Early Years Wales Quality Mark and the SSTEW scale promote quality above the statutory requirements but focus on different aspects of early years provision. The Early Years Wales Quality Mark provides a comprehensive framework for assessing the overall quality of a setting, including

leadership, curriculum, and staff qualifications, while also fostering ongoing professional development. In contrast, the SSTEW scale specifically focuses on improving the quality of interactions between staff and children, with a particular emphasis on emotional well-being and sustained shared thinking.

The key benefit of these methods is their capacity to drive continuous improvement in practice, which not only benefits children but also supports staff in developing their professional skills. However, both approaches also have limitations, such as the time and resource commitments required for implementation, and their potential to create additional pressure on staff. Despite these challenges, adopting these additional quality assurance methods helps settings go above and beyond statutory requirements, creating an environment that is supportive, reflective, and committed to excellence.

Ultimately, the integration of these quality assurance methods into daily practice can significantly enhance the care and learning outcomes for children, ensuring that early years settings provide the highest standard of provision possible. By investing in continuous quality improvement and reflective practices, settings can foster a culture of excellence that benefits all stakeholders involved, particularly the children they serve.

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