

Critical Reflection on the Benefits of Additional Methods of Promoting and Ensuring Quality above the Statutory Requirements.

This paper will look at what quality means when applied to early years settings, along with why it is important to achieve high quality and how this importance is determined. Two methods of quality assurance will be compared, looking at advantages and disadvantages of both.

Rudoe (2020) maintains that the term 'quality' within the education system is complex to define. Care Inspectorate Wales (2018) state that quality early childhood education and care settings offer children the best possible experiences that enable them to reach their full potential, meeting the highest standards to contribute holistically to their wellbeing. Similarly, Welsh Government (2023b) describe a high quality early years provision as one that goes beyond the minimum expectations, reflecting continuously and making improvements that affords their service users the greatest experiences and opportunities.

Department for Education (2018) claims that quality can be characterised by structural and process quality. Clark (2016) and Essa and Burnam (2020) agree, stating that structural quality includes areas such as practitioner qualifications, staff-child ratios, the physical environment, and group size. Whereas process quality includes areas like the choice of pedagogy, the curriculum quality, and the experiences the children are given. Further to this, Torii, Stacey and Cloney (2017) recognised that regulatory standards, governance, and the level of investment in the early childhood education and care sector can also influence quality, naming this third domain, system quality. Department of education (2015) and SpieB (2013) concur, stating that investment is an influencer on quality, and that the acquirement of skills in the early years provides the platform to easily acquire new skills later in life, however without investment, this full potential will not be seen. Mathers, Roberts and Sylva (2014) claim that of the three quality domains, process quality is the most influential on child outcomes but is the most difficult to measure as it requires comprehensive observations which can prove to be time consuming, whereas structural quality is the most easily assessed due to its objectivity (Siraj *et al.*, 2019).

Welsh Government (2021) believe in a holistic, meaningful learning experience for the children of Wales, stating that the quality of this experience is determined by the quality of enabling environments, enabling adults, and enabling experiences and their quality of interplay when implemented as part of the curriculum.

According to Mathers and Smees (2014), Gambaro, Stewart and Waldfogel (2015) and Department for Education (2018), quality in early years settings is linked to the level of staff qualifications. Hu *et al.* (2017) found that practitioners who had qualifications at degree level offered a higher level of learning opportunities from the language that they used during their interactions with children, compared to the practitioners who were educated to certificate level. This is consistent with research by Hamre (2014) who claims that interactions between practitioner and child, such as responsive caregiving, demonstrate stronger developmental outcomes across cognitive, social, and behavioural areas. Hu *et al.* (2017) state the use of fewer non-suggestive and direct commands resulted in the children receiving a higher quality education as their language and literacy development was more progressive. Essa and Burnham (2020) agree, claiming that an authoritarian style of teaching is not effective in leading children to reach their full cognitive and social abilities. Similarly, Hu and Torr (2016) recognise the significance of the type of conversations adults have with young children as an influence on their development, claiming that reasoning talk, whether logical or social, exposes the child to cultural differences and stimulates their curiosity and critical thinking skills. Welsh Government (2022) supports this by stating that high quality early education ignites curiosity and develops children who celebrate diverse cultures. Araujo, Dormal and Schady (2019) found that the relationship between child developmental outcomes and the quality of childcare received are significant, with notable increases in problem-solving, communication and fine motor skills with higher quality practitioner-child interactions. Vygotsky was also a firm believer that adults contributed to child development by scaffolding their learning, to enable children to carry out tasks they would not be able to execute independently (Aubrey and Riley, 2022). Welsh Government (2023a) states how the quality of relationships children experience, such as adults providing respectful care and encouraging curiosity, can contribute to their sense of identity and autonomy. As they begin to feel valued, loved and nurtured their sense of belonging is enhanced. This is supported by Maslow who believed that for an

individual to reach their full potential they must feel a sense of love and belonging (Aubrey and Riley 2022).

Alongside enabling adults, Welsh Government (2022) claim that effective environments are needed to ensure the best outcomes for children, as they offer a stimulating, meaningful and child centered experiences that help them to develop through the five developmental pathways.

Adult-child ratios are also seen as a determinant of quality, as Venninen *et al.* (2014) states that having a high adult to child ratio gives challenges when listening to every child's voice equally. Therefore, potentially dismissing the child's right to be heard, as stated in article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, no date). However, Doherty and Hughes (2014) state that countries that are providing high quality education and care to preschool children, such as Germany and Denmark have no restriction on the number of children individual practitioners can look after.

Taylor (2015) states how high-quality relationships and interactions between practitioners and children are associated with improved developmental outcomes. This is supported by the Welsh Government (2022) who also claim that quality of the learning environments and the experiences offered play a role in the developmental growth of young children. Not only are practitioner's relationships with children important, but so are the relationships they hold with parents, with Cottle and Alexander (2014) stating that communicating with parents is important in gaining trust and sharing values, and that without this, it is not possible to have a quality provision.

Research carried out to find out whether quality of early years setting has an impact on children's future outcomes, include the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education project (EPPE), the Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education project (EPPSE) and the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years project (REPEY). The EPPE and EPPSE project determined that quality education in pre-school is attributed to long term effects on children's educational outcomes, with results for GCSEs being foreseen because of the quality of early years schooling. Aside from academic achievements, behavioural differences were also noted, with less

hyperactivity being seen and an increase in self-regulation being related to high quality early years provision. Children recognised as having parents with low levels of qualifications were seen to benefit from attending high quality preschool settings (Sylva *et al.*, 2004 and Department of Education, 2015). Siraj and Mayo (2014) state that this is important in reducing socio-economic divide. CARE project (2015) states that low quality childcare provision in the early years can have negative effects on social, cognitive and language development and is more probable in children from low-income families.

The REPEY project recognised that settings that were most effective offered more interactions where sustained shared thinking occurred between practitioners and children and that greater cognitive development is achieved when this is combined with the adult's use of open questions (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002). Results from these studies show the importance of children attending high quality settings if they are to achieve their best developmental outcomes.

Therefore, reflection on practice and provision is a way of assuring quality (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2018). As part of reflective practice, the three domains of quality need to be measured to enable assessment of all areas, so that informed improvements can be made to the quality of provision and children's developmental outcomes (Eadie *et al.* 2022). Without this reflective practice, practitioners are not adhering to, or going beyond the national minimum standards that are a benchmark in providing children with a quality care and education experience (Welsh Government, 2023b) and therefore not ensuring they reach their full potential in accordance with their rights (Welsh Government, 2022 and UNICEF, no date). Ho, Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2010) states that there are a plethora of rating scales and measures of quality that look at the aspects of the setting and the way they contribute to children's developmental outcomes. Munton, McCullum and Rivers (2001) claims that quality assurance schemes can also aid in the improvement of the quality of practice delivered, by getting practitioners to evaluate their provision, comparing it with statements of best practice to establish areas for improvement. Subsequently, Care Inspectorate Wales (2023) advises that using a quality assurance framework in this way develops a shared

understanding of what a quality setting looks like which aims to support the improvement of the learning outcomes and care of children.

One method of measuring quality is using environmental rating scales, such as the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, also known as ECERS. It is used as a standard measure of structure and process quality in early years settings (Leana, Appelbaum and Schevchuk, 2009). ECERSUK (no date) states that ECERS not only measures quality but can also be used to measure changes in quality over a period of time. Betancur *et al.* (2021) describe ECERS as an observational measure, with Harms, Clifford and Cryer (2015) agreeing stating how there are 43 items arranged in seven subcategories, these being, space and furnishings, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, interactions, program structure and parents and staff. Siraj *et al.* (2019) state that ECERS evaluates quality of certain areas of curricula, such as literacy, scientific and mathematical learning as well as diversity.

Mayer and Beckh (2016) state how ECERS can be applied to any pedagogical concept, with an emphasis on high quality environments, which consist of opportunities for stimulating learning experiences, protection of the children's health and safety and the formation of trusting positive relationships. Bowlby's attachment theory stresses the importance of trusting, safe relationships as a factor in positive child development (Holmes, 2014)

Chen and Wolf (2021) however, show uncertainty regarding the evaluation of child outcomes to process quality as measured by the ECERS, suggesting further evidence is required. Similarly, Gordon *et al.* states that disadvantages to ECERS include how observers make many subjective assessments during coding and that some scores rely on teacher reports.

Sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing scale, also known as SSTEW scale, is a quality rating scale that shines a focus on wellbeing, self-regulation and sustained shared thinking, which Howard *et al.* (2018) state is the interaction of two or more people, collaborating ideas, to problem solve or further understand ideas and narratives. Siraj *et al.* (2019) and Howard *et al.* (2018) agree that the measuring and monitoring of sustained shared thinking should be prioritised in early years education due to the

developmental benefits it has. Melhuish, Siraj and Kingston (2015) state that the first developmental area assessed as part of SSTEWS is Social and emotional development. Which includes areas of building trust, confidence and independence, and social and emotional well-being. The second area is Cognitive development, which looks at language and communication development. The third looks at the level of supporting and extending language and communication and more general cognitive development. The fourth area is the support of learning and critical thinking, and the fifth area relates to the assessment of learning and language. From use of the SSTEWS scale, the quality of interactions in practice can be determined (Siraj *et al.* 2019). Howard *et al.* (2018) state how SSTEWS is based on current developmental theories and beliefs about effective practice. The areas that SSTEWS looks at are all areas that the Welsh Government (2022) believe contribute to creating confident, ambitious, capable learners with a positive disposition to lifelong learning. Melhuish, Siraj and Kingston (2015) state that care and emotional wellbeing alone are not enough for cognitive development to occur, which is why the SSTEWS scale encompasses sustained shared thinking into the scale also.

A disadvantage to the SSTEWS scale is that the practitioners wishing to use the scale for self-assessment are recommended to attend a training session, which may not always be possible resulting in individuals using the scale without a true understanding of it. Another disadvantage is that it requires judgments to be made, which could result in error due to lack of concentration or willingness to complete a given task. (Meluish, Siraj and Kingston, 2015 and Kowalski *et al.*, 2018)

Siraj *et al.* 2019 state how advantages of both ECERS and SSTEWS are that they have undergone standardization procedures and their psychometric properties, which includes the prediction of child outcomes are well established. Howard *et al.* (2018) states how both ECERS and SSTEWS can be used in inspections, for research, audit and by practitioners as a process of self-assessment to improve practice.

The Welsh Government (2022) has a vision of quality practice that includes effective environments, engaging experiences, and a child-centered pedagogy where

practitioners interact effectively with children through sustained shared thinking to enable their development through the five developmental pathways, including wellbeing. ECERS and STEW could both be used to determine whether practitioners are fulfilling Welsh Governments goal of quality.

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