

Leadership and management for systems of quality

ECEY 6011_ BIRM

Part 2 – Reflective Paper

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Defining Quality in Early Years

Introduction

By providing quality education in early years settings practitioners have the potential to positively impact all stakeholders using their settings and the wider community (UNISEF, No Date). The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework which details minimum standards, and the Early Years Inspection Handbook can support practitioners to understand what quality might look and feel like in settings by defining quality standards including staff qualifications and ratios requirements (Def, 2024; UK Government, 2024). However, this legislation and inspection process may not be enough to monitor, evaluate and improve ongoing quality in early years settings, especially for children with special educational or social emotional needs, other specific quality assurance tools might be beneficial in identifying gaps and suggesting how to modify provision to drive high-quality for all stakeholders in the settings (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014). This article will examine how quality is defined and used in early childhood settings to promote High-quality and explore how SSTEWS and ECERS quality assurance tools might support a early years setting to the continuous promotion of quality and to beyond the minimum standards set out in the EYFS.

Quality

The concept of quality remains challenging and disputed according to Reed and Walker (2015) and Moss (2014). The notion of quality is described as being subjective as it is often bases upon individual values and beliefs of quality (Tusla, 2021). However, some aspects of quality are established in early education and care, these include process quality (relationships) and structural quality (systems) (Bonetti and Brown, 2018). Nevertheless, understanding of how these elements of quality work in practice must be agreed upon as they have a directed impact on

children and it is their development and well-being which is the priority for practitioners (Bonetti and Brown, 2018).

The OECD (2021) states elements of structural quality including standards and governance are the foundation to policies which affect children's education, development and wellbeing. In addition, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) (Bonetti and Brown, 2018) theorize that structural and process quality are interrelated, and that structural quality delivers a context where process quality can be conducted successfully. The United Nations (2023 p.20) posits that it is structural quality such as adult to child ratios and high-quality in education that can break poverty cycles, reduce inequality for the most vulnerable and marginalized in our society and support life-long sustainability and health (DfE, 2024; Gromada and Richardson, 2021; Wall. Litjens and Taguma, 2015).

In England the arbiter of high-quality in early year settings is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and they are responsible for judging the quality of early years provisions through an inspection process (Ofsted, 2024). Whilst these inspections aim is to promote quality; they can face challenges in accurately and consistently assessing quality in settings as they often focus on observation rather than holistic development according to Butler (2017). Early years practitioners use the Early Years Statutory Framework (EYFS) and The Early Years Inspection Handbook, for guidance in implementing quality in their practice and throughout the setting (Ouston, Earley and Fidler, 2019 p.4-9; BERA, 2017 p. 108-111).

Quality assurance is emphasised in both documents which detail various structural methods to ensure quality standards and outstanding or high-quality is met in early years settings through staff development and self-evaluation, analysis and moderation of data on children's learning and development, through policies and the application of procedures in practice such as those found in safeguarding and Ofsted inspections (DfE, 2024; UK Government, 2024). Possible challenges to structural quality are changes priority for social funding or governments views of what quality looks like, for example neoliberal ideas of a top-down approach to staffing structures can directly impact practitioners' development and play a role in the quality of education children experience (Sims and Waniganayake, 2015). In the current EYFS (DfE, 2024) the unique child and child-centred pedagogy is developed through process quality, when practitioners use their knowledge and experience to understand how a child accesses learning and if there are barriers to accessing learning environment or to the child's development. Where challenges arise that possibly challenge a child-centred approach, practitioners may be limited in what they can do regarding funding or staffing ratios, however practitioners can ensure that training is disseminated to maintain a high-quality experienced staff and staff morale which can also play a part in quality education and child wellbeing (Fairchild 2021; Malti, 2020). Process quality is also about the relationships and interactions of practitioners and children and vice versa to understand the uniqueness of a child,

the child's well-being and how care routines and development outcomes can be met (Solvason, Cliffe and Bailey, 2019). It is important that the views of parents are actively listened too and acted upon as they are the first teachers and educators of children (Social Mobility Commission, 2022; Birth to 5 matters, no date).

Ultimately there is no single method of applying or fulfilling high-quality in early education (UK Government, 2024) and striving for quality in early years settings is a perpetual process rather than a tick box exercise (Togher and Fenech, 2020). The National Children's Bureau (No date) have developed quality improvement principles which are based upon concepts of process and structural quality and suggest that using the strategy of 'Reflect, Review and Respond' may support practitioners to gauge ongoing quality and what quality means in practice and in providing better outcomes for children and their families.

SSTEWS

SSTEWS, or the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing scale. SSTEWS integrates various aspects of the early years settings to examine practices that help children aged 2 to 5 years to acquire the ability to think collaboratively and critically. Together, the 14 components of SSTEWS form five sub-scales that are associated with two developmental domains. These domains, the first domain's focus, social-emotional development, is primarily found in two sub-scales: firstly, fostering independence, confidence, and trust; and promoting social and emotional wellbeing. Supporting and extending language and communication, supporting learning and critical thinking, and assessing language and learning are the three sub-scales that primarily comprise the focus for the second area, cognitive development (Howard et al. 2020; Siraj, et al. 2015).

The scales were developed from evidence generated from the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) and The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) projects which had used the non-statutory quality tool ECERS and observation, although the term sustained shared thinking is not formally used in the this research it was noted that quality interactions between highly skilled practitioners and children in relation to high-quality early years education performance (Taggart et al. 2015; Howard et al. 2020; Burchinal et al., 2021).

A potential barrier or challenge to this non statutory quality assurance tool is that it requires experienced and qualified staff to understand how SST benefits child development (Birth to Seven Matters, 2015), it would also be beneficial for staff to be aware of the connections of sustained shared thinking (SST) and childhood theory which are associated with SST with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Bruner's Scaffolding with are the foundation of SST (Pound, 2014). Wall, Litjens and Taguma (2015) suggests that scaffold-focused learning environments, assist practitioners to support learning only when it is needed and extent support only if a learning objective is beyond a child's developmental ability, this provides a learning environment that has a positive effect on learning and development outcomes.

Bloom's Taxonomy can provide practitioners with a framework to support them understand the different levels and processes of thinking in early childhood (Caveney, 2024; Adams, 2015) when developing skills in SST. Without this knowledge practitioners might struggle to identify what qualifies as quality in their interactions and how to scaffold and assess children's understandings and as a result may restrict a child's curiosity and creativity, practitioners need to strike a balance between encouraging autonomous exploration and structured guidance (Senol, 2024 p.233-236). One method that might assist new practitioners in SST is coaching is conducive in early years setting as it supports a child-centred approach by not removing staff to attend training, instead coaching enhances quality in education and care and is a proven as a personal development tool that promotes resilient and reflective practice by equipping practitioners to provide the start possible in life through good quality care (Parenta, 2024; Elek and Page, 2019).

ECERS

Unlike SSTEWS, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) focuses on the quality of early years environments and how they promote development in early childhood. The environment is assessed and scored upon the quality of various domains including physical space, materials, groups, health and safety and as a tool of quality assurance it is widely used internationally (Early, 2018; Setodji, Schaack and Le, 2018).

ECERS scales look at the whole child and support practitioners to enable environments to achieve development outcomes similar to some of the key elements of the EYFS (DfE, 2024) the scales may assist practitioners prepare and plan learning opportunities that promote language and reinforce independence in play (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014). The scales also have a strong emphasis on play based learning and state that play is a crucial aspect of early childhood development which again is mentioned in the EYFS (DfE, 2024). However the ECERS scales do this in greater detail and assist practitioners in creating environments which support learning through play-based interactions and with resources that lend themselves to free and purposeful play exploration (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014; Setodji, Schaack and Le, 2018).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as cited in Nasiopoulou et al. (2022) states that a child's development is impacted by its interactions with its environments therefore a understanding of the 'whole child' is crucial in early years education. Nasiopoulou et al. (2022) posits that the use of ECERS to assess quality in early years environments aligns with Bronfenbrenner's theory as the scales look at the microsystem, in this case the settings environment and how it impacts the child and its development, language and learning is quality subscale of ECERS and it is through quality interactions in learning environments that can enhance language development in early childhood. According to Mayer and Beckh (2016) practitioners might also observe Bowlby's Attachment theory through children's interactions in the

environment when carrying out the assessment and make adjustments which support children's emotional wellbeing.

Mathers, et al. (2012) found that a barrier in using ECERS is that the scales give an ideal perspective of how early years environments should look and work and did not consider the uniqueness and characteristics that some early years environments offer making the scales inflexible, Mathers, et al. (2012) adds that a good understanding of the assessment scales is important when evaluating the scoring process. Brodie (2018) posits that using any quality tool should be a team process that involves evaluating the data collected and collaborating planning of adjustments, adding that the goal is to use quality assurance tools to enhance practice and improve outcomes for children.

Conclusion

The quality assurance tools examined within this article both contribute measuring quality in different areas of early years practice, and both hold merit in supporting quality education in early years settings and therefore have a positive influence and impact on children's development and learning outcomes (Howard et al. 2018; Gordon et al. 2014). Unicef (no date) states that quality assurance tools need to advance as our understanding of quality in early years education and care change and as ideas of inclusive practice develop and change so must the tools that measure quality if they are to be effective in improving equality for children and support them in reaching developmental milestones. Through a consistent approach in the use of quality assurance tools, practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of their own professional practice and make informed decisions to improve early years education and care for all children in their settings (Brodie, 2018).

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