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Reflective Paper Part 2

Leadership and Management for Systems of Quality.

Introduction

Cottle and Alexander (2012) state that "quality" in early childhood services has been debated internationally for years, due to varying perspectives from stakeholders, including parents, practitioners, children, policymakers, and managers. Moreover, Woodhead (2000) emphasises the importance of recognising children as active participants in defining quality. He states that children's perceptions and experiences should shape how quality is understood and implemented by practitioners. However, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) stress "quality" in early education needs to be something flexible and shaped by the values and context of individual settings. They argue that conventional measures overlook the unique aspects of different environments within settings and lack support for defining "quality" collaboratively, to meet the specific needs of local communities.

Reed and Canning (2012) highlight that self-evaluation enhances practices by gathering findings from those directly involved, most importantly the children, to identify areas for improvement. It also involves integrating external advice, acknowledging internal strengths, and understanding that resulting actions may influence how individuals within the organisation interact and communicate. This process is often structured as a reflective cycle of questioning. Additionally, adults support play and exploration, enabling children to tackle challenges, solve problems, make choices, and ask questions that enhance learning outcomes. Through this approach, practitioners can reflect on and refine activities to deliver high-quality

experiences (Reed and Canning, 2012). Furthermore, Moss (2016) argues the traditional notion of quality during early education, suggesting shaping by assumptions and beliefs rather than being an essential requirement. He highlights accountability in the decisions provisions make, as these impact the services offered. This could include National Minimum standards {NMS} implemented by Care inspectorate Wales (Welsh Government, 2023).

According to *Eadie et al.* (2022) quality in early childhood education and care is divided into three areas: structural, process, and system. Structural quality: refers to foundational aspects of early years settings such as staff qualifications, ratios and the physical environment. Process: refers to experiences and interactions within the setting as well as practitioner and child relationships. It also encompasses the overall atmosphere and environment, (UNICEF, n.d). System: collectively includes setting policies, funding and legislation, ensuring the successful application of structural and process quality. This framework encourages practitioners to embrace a holistic approach where all areas are interconnected and significantly improve the implementation of high-quality care and practices, Welsh Government (2023), UNICEF (no date).

Siraj-Blatchford, Sammons, Taggart, Sylva, and Melhuish (2008) conducted significant research as part of the EPPE project, focusing on successful teaching practices in early education. Reinforcing the critical role of high-quality interactions between practitioners and children, alongside the importance of producing an effective environment that fosters investigation and growth. They highlight necessity for adults to be responsive to individual children’s needs, providing opportunities for meaningful engagement. Additionally, the research identifies how intentional teaching practices and enhanced supportive and engaging environments, can have beneficial effects for children’s intellectual and social skills. Likewise, according to Early Years Careers (2018), provisions positively influence children from disadvantaged backgrounds by providing access to experiences and resources they may lack at home. High-quality settings help narrow developmental disparities among children, ensuring that all children start school with a strong foundation for further learning.

According to Ofsted (2024) a challenge that many early years provisions encounter is a high staff turnover, this can hinder practitioners from building strong relationships with children, reducing their capabilities to understand the individual needs of children and to identify support for development moving forward. This can adversely affect the quality of interactions, as inconsistent staffing disrupts the key person relationships essential for fostering trust and understanding, such disruptions can significantly hinder opportunities for meaningful play and rich language interactions, impacting children's holistic growth (Owston, Jones and Stanley, 2024). This also links to Vygotsky and Cole (1978) emphasising the importance of connection, communication and socialisation when building relationships. Vygotsky suggests that learning occurs through collaborative processes and that the presence of consistent and skilled individuals, such as caregivers or educators can guide children within the "zone of proximal development." Inconsistent staffing could hinder these interactions and the scaffolding process essential for meaningful learning and trust-building.

However, Women's Budget Group (2024) points out that workforce challenges can take a toll on the emotional well-being of staff. Regularly relying on temporary employees without thorough inductions can place extra responsibilities on existing staff, leading to increased stress and fatigue. Additionally, limiting opportunities for staff to attend training sessions can obstruct their career growth, leaving them feeling unmotivated and disheartened. According to (Vicente, Venegas, and Guerrero, 2024) early years practitioners are fundamental to shaping early education and fostering children's development, but retaining staff remains a challenge. Factors encouraging retention include a sense of purpose, professional development, and supportive colleague relationships. However, turnover is driven by low wages, high caseloads, lack of recognition, and limited input in decision-making. Meeting practitioners' needs for growth, connection, and purpose is essential for reducing turnover and improving working conditions, (Vicente, Venegas, and Guerrero, 2024). Moreover, Jones (2014) asserts that delivering quality requires practitioners to have both knowledge and experience in evaluating and providing meaningful high-quality experiences for the children and families they support.

ITERS

According to Welsh Government (2025) It is a requirement for Flying Start provisions to maintain a quality assurance framework supported by evidence. This system is reviewed by the Local Authority using a designated evaluation tool, and the insights gained should guide the settings development plan. Models of tools for assessing and improving quality for the programme features the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS 3), among others designed to enhance Early Years settings. These tools contribute significantly to ensuring high standards of support and development. Quality assurance is a form of continuous enhancement that recognises the setting's progress against agreed standards, achieving a certified acknowledgement. The chosen framework should be appropriate, adaptable and diverse to the Flying Start initiative (Welsh Government, 2025).

Moreover, this is supported by Harms *et.al* (2017) ITERS-3 addresses the comprehensive needs of infants and toddlers, while offering a structured approach to enhancing program quality. It evaluates both environmental provisions, teacher and child, focusing on critical developmental domains such as language, cognitive, social-emotional, and physical growth. Alongside ensuring health and safety standards and mitigating potential hazards, *Health and Safety Act* (1974), (Harms, *et.al,*2017).

Murphy (2023) conducted a study examining the use of the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, within New Hampshire's childcare quality system in the United States. Research identified that ITERS-3 scores are positively linked to quality ratings but highlighted limitations in how the system reflects authentic childcare environments. Recommendations were implemented to improve the system's practical application and framework.

The Early Interactions Project, Kinkead-Clark (2022) assessed the quality of childcare provisions in Jamaica, (42 in total) using ITERS-3. The study found that nurseries performed poorly across all quality indicators measured by the scale. It emphasised the need for significantly improved professional development for staff, enhanced funding for childcare facilities and improved regulation of services for

children attending these settings. Likewise, Abbott and Langston (2004) point out the importance of providing continuous and relevant training for staff, asserting that the quality of experiences and provisions for children depends on the expertise of the adults supporting them and the standard of training they receive.

According to NCRLAP (2024) an initiative which focused on assessment and improvement to quality childcare environments in North Carolina used tools such as ITERS 3. Highlighted the tool provided a detailed framework for self-evaluation, but many educators found the process challenging due to the complexity of the tool. Mary Evans, featuring in Nursery World concurs; by pointing out the sophisticated scale can be confusing and can cause difficulties for educators, especially in relation to the scale's methodised nature which may not fully account for the individual demands of diverse early years settings. The process can also be very time consuming which can significantly disrupt the daily flow of routine within provisions, (Nursery World, 2012).

However, local authorities in England stress the importance of approaching settings with understanding when scores fall below expectations or differ from inspection outcomes. Maintaining momentum is crucial to ensure that settings perceive the tool as a collaborative resource, rather than something being imposed upon them. Despite these challenges, many provisions value the scales for offering a detailed evaluation and a clear framework for improving quality, benefits which surpass any associated barriers (Department for Education, 2018).

The Leuven Scale

The Leuven Scale, developed by Ferre Laevers, supports childcare practitioners in creating learning environments that enhance children's wellbeing and involvement (Eyworks, 2022).

MacRae and Jones (2020) examine the Leuven Scale model for assessing children's involvement in early years provisions. This analysis highlights the extensive use across the education sector as a tool for evaluating the quality of learning environments, through observations of children's engagement levels. They

examine how 'involvement' is a changing process influenced by relationships and surroundings not just a static result. The scale acts as both an assessment tool and a framework for enhancing educational practices. By identifying areas where children need support, it allows educators to create environments that are more tailored to fostering engagement and well-being. MacRae and Jones' research emphasises the importance of using the Leuven Scale as a starting point, encouraging practitioners to embrace a more reflective meaning and perspective on children's engagement and wellbeing.

Sando (2019) points out the importance of creating environments that support relational play and outdoor experiences, which enhance well-being and physical activity an idea closely aligned with the Leuven Scale's focus on fostering emotional well-being and involvement. Structural Learning (2024) supports this perspective, highlighting that wellness and involvement scales are vital tools for designing appropriate, age-specific activities that cater to the physical, emotional, and educational needs of each child. However, he acknowledges that conducting and scoring detailed observations can be time consuming and restrict regular routines within settings (Sando,2019).

The Leuven Scale method provides valuable opportunities for our professional development in relation to reflection. Observing and scoring children's involvement is only the initial stage, the crucial importance lies in how we use that insight, keeping in mind that our interpretations are inherently subjective (Woods, 2017). Dubiel (2015) points out that this emphasis on standardisation might draw attention away from the unique and dynamic nature of educational experiences. While the scale is a useful tool, its limitations suggest it should be part of a more holistic and flexible approach to evaluation. This is supported by Family (2021) who highlight the significant advantages of using the Leuven Scale, emphasising its child-centred approach to observation. They further propose that applying the scale to evaluate the well-being and engagement of adults within the setting can positively influence staff interactions, enhancing their knowledge, motivation, and overall well-being. This method fosters stronger connections among all individuals in the environment, promoting a holistic understanding of the community's dynamics (Family, 2021).

However, Structural Learning (2024) argues the Leuven Scale is a valuable tool but has limitations that should be acknowledged. To optimise its effectiveness, it should be integrated into a wider, more holistic evaluation framework, rather than relied upon as a sole measure of quality. To work in partnership with tools such as ITERS 3 (*Harms et al*., 2017, p. 45), The Sustained Shared Thinking Tool (SSTEW) is a concept used to enhance learning and development through meaningful interactions, effectively promoting the distinctions between regulatory frameworks and non-regulatory practices, *Siraj et al.* (2019). Moreover, Moorhouse (2025) notes that the effectiveness of the Leuven scale is influenced by practitioners' ability to interpret children's well-being and involvement, which can vary, due to individual perspectives and judgements. It can also be affected by the practitioner’s understanding and knowledge of the children they are observing.

The Early Years Foundation Phase in Wales, underscores great importance of emotional well-being in supporting children’s overall development and education, by prioritising secure and nurturing environments where children feel valued. It aims to build resilience, social skills, and cultural awareness, preparing them for lifelong learning and growth (Welsh Government,2022). This aligns with the principles of the Leuven Scale, which helps practitioners refine their provisions to further support children's well-being and emotional development (Laevers, 2005), (Storli and Hansen Sandseter, 2019).

Conclusion

Environmental scales, such as the ITERS-3 and the Leuven Scale, are essential tools for evaluating and improving children’s learning environments. They provide structured assessments of areas such as physical spaces and emotional well-being. However, effectiveness depends on application and integration into other monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Although these scales provide valuable information, they should be used alongside other methods to ensure a balanced and diverse strategy to support child growth and understanding, thereby offering quality opportunities for meaningful interactions (Whitebread and Coltman, 2015).

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