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Quality

What is quality?

Birth to 5 matters (no date), Foundation Years (2014) Education Endowment Foundation (2024) all state that high quality education is important for every child and can enhance each child's learning outcomes through high aspirations and effective teaching. This high-quality early childhood education is achieved by working together and providing high-quality instruction and practice to improve children's outcomes daily. According to Elwick *et al* (2017) quality has been a key and widespread idea in early childhood education policies around the world. The importance of quality is to offer individualised learning, development, and support catered to each child's needs, which will lay the groundwork for future success, wellbeing, and lifelong learning.

Furthermore, Robb (2025), Bento and Dias (2017) say that continuously evaluating oneself, identifying opportunities for improvement, putting improvement plans into action, and assessing their results, altogether are a recognised process of childcare quality improvement. Additionally, having high quality teamwork can contribute to the high-quality planning. Robb (2025) agrees with Education Endowment Foundation (2024) by insisting that during the foundation years, children should have access to high-quality services. He adds that the best quality in educational settings improves the cognitive, emotional, and social skills required for lifelong learning. Social and emotional intelligence, cognitive abilities, and brain development all benefit from high-quality care. They also promote children's wellbeing and mental health. For children to receive a high-quality education, the staff must be trained, establish good relationships with the parents and children, develop a curriculum that is appropriate for the children's developmental stage, and ensure that the setting is safe and encouraging (Robb, 2025).

Method 1 SSTEW (Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional well-being)

What is it?

According to Brodie (2024) and Mackenzie (2016) SSTEW is interaction between both the child/children and the practitioners and is a situation where they work collaboratively to solve an issue, make an idea clear, assess an activity and develop a story. The ideas must be developed and expanded, and everyone must contribute to them. It helps practitioners to extend children's thinking and learning. However, Brodie (2024) continues to say that for children who have not yet reached the age of talking, the discussions can focus on what the practitioners observe of the children and their interests and how the children approach problem-solving. They can extend children's thinking and learning through physical interactions during play. Sefton Council (2024) and Howard *et al* (2018) also add that the SSTEW scale is a method used to evaluate the methodology and environment of early childhood educations.

Advantages

Watch me grow (no date) claims that the SSTEW scale has its advantages: it builds trust and confidence between child and practitioner, promotes children's independence, helps the children's social and emotional wellbeing, promotes the development of language and communication, as well as helping the practitioners assess learning and language. Brodie (2024) adds that the SSTEW scale is a powerful method, and children are at the centre of it. If practitioners follow its lead, using this method helps children's metacognition. SSTEW builds on two key skills: active listening and positive questioning. Brodie (2024) adds that the SSTEW scale can be used throughout all learning areas of the curriculum. Although the scale is available for all children, it does need adapting for those children with diverse needs. Practitioners may need to individualize their approach to each ALN child.

Disadvantages

According to Brodie (2024) and Hoare (2016), as well as advantages, there are also disadvantages. These include finding time to extend conversations, especially when the

setting is busy. It may also be difficult to engage in deep conversations if there is a large group of children. Dependent upon their confidence levels, the practitioners may feel uneasy about extending children's thinking, assuming that they should have all the answers. Some children may be reluctant to engage in conversation, and some may react with confusion or distress. According to Waibel (2021), SSTEWS very rarely takes place in early childhood settings, and when it does, it is mostly seen where there are preexisting collaborative relationships. However, Hoare (2016) claims that disadvantages may include staff being unaware of the rules/boundaries or expectations and how to apply them consistently. Staff may not have the appropriate training to employ The SSTEWS scale.

What does this method tell us?

According to Siraj *et al* (2024), Watch me grow (no date) the SSTEWS method tells us how schools and other professionals enable children to develop their language abilities for thinking and their social and emotional health. They also outline how it has been extensively incorporated into numerous international curricula. SSTEWS also provides information about the best way for practitioners to support children between the ages of two and five, establishing abilities in self-regulation, building solid relationships, effective communication and long-term shared thinking and emotional health (Siraj *et al* 2024).

What won't it tell you?

The SSTEWS scale focuses on the quality of interactions between staff and children however the scale does not cover areas such as the physical environment / resources or curriculum planning. It also does not support the idea that all children develop uniformly at the same rate. Although focuses on the interactional quality and is not a comprehensive assessment to all aspects of quality in early childhood settings (Waters and McDonald 2020, Siraj and Kingston 2015).

How does it drive quality?

Leatherbarrow (2025) claims that SSTEWS is seen as an essential indicator of high-quality early childhood environments, since it encourages: in-depth learning, critical

thinking and problem-solving abilities, all of which contribute to holistic development and lifetime learning. Furthermore Featherbe (2020) continues to say that an increasing amount of research indicates a connection between children's outcomes and interactions encouraged by highly effective and efficient practices.

What information is needed to improve the provision?

To improve this scale practitioners can encourage children to use their voice more, conduct parents' surveys that provide information about any changes at home. Having regular staff meetings to discuss the SSTEWS scale and ensure staff are fully trained, increasing understanding and tracking the scale with numerous children to provide rich evidence (Brodie 2024, Jones, 2024). Furthermore, Brodie (2024) adds that in order to improve the provision of SSTEWS, it may be necessary to improve or create a more supportive environment.

Method 2 The Leuven scale

What is it?

The Leuven scale is used by educators, nursery professionals, and childcare specialists to assess a child's emotional health and involvement. In the early years, the theory of emotional well-being and involvement is especially significant since it protects a child's emotional growth while promoting engagement for learning (Learning Journals, 2025, Jackson, 2023, Thomas and McInnes 2018). Additionally, according to structural learning (2021), two elements of children's learning growth and development are their emotional well-being and involvement. The most important techniques for documenting one-time observations for every child are provided by this engagement and wellness scale, which also makes it simple to review and create action plans to enhance children's involvement and well-being. However, Arnerich (2021) as children evolve with time, the Leuven scale ought not to be a one-off observation. As Each day, children experience different emotions, and a child may behave differently when they alone to when they are with interacting with others.

Advantages

Arnerich (2021) confirms that the Leuven scale's advantages include its ability to detect signs of stress in children and its ability to assist professionals in understanding how well children are adjusting to their new surroundings. An additional benefit is that it promotes children's wellness by fostering openness, receptivity, flexibility, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Additionally, it promotes children's happiness and confidence. Furthermore, Structural Learning (2021) explain that the Leuven scale places the children at the centre of early childhood education and is based on insightful observations. Children's growth can be enhanced by greater levels of interaction. It assists in determining whether any children require more assistance. Moreover, Structural Learning (2021) and Jackson (2023) continue to say advantages of using the scale can ensure practitioners create a supportive environment that meets the emotional and educational needs of children encouraging holistic child development.

Disadvantages

Arnerich (2021) claims that the scale requires a lot of work, but when utilised correctly, it may be an effective instrument. Even though they may be playing contentedly, children's learning and development are not being challenged. Thomas and McInnes (2018) continues to highlight that while the scale offers benefits for children's involvement and well-being, if the scale is not completed correctly, assumptions may be made about the children's wellbeing when they haven't been consulted. According to Brodie (2025) The ratio of children to adults may not be sufficient to complete the scale. Furthermore, Guimaraes *et al* (2016) say that while it was thought to be best practice to have children participate in self-initiated activities for assessment, this was not always thought to be feasible. While it should be child-initiated, there needs to be a form of structure in place to gather the data required for this scale; otherwise, children might not want to participate. However, Guimaraes *et al* (2016) claim that when children are evaluated using both adult-structured and adult-initiated activities, it is necessary to take into account different experiences and data. This is demonstrated by the interdependence between high involvement and well-being when participating in self-chosen/self-initiated activities. This calls into question the fairness of the evaluation procedure. Nonetheless, the challenging decrease in well-being to a fixed number, the pressure to evaluate children when their well-being was low, and the practice of basing

evaluation on adult-structured activities rather than observations of child-initiated participation are all issues. Moreover, Brodie (2025) states that research on the Leuven scale has shown that implementation quality can have a consistent impact on children's results.

What does the method tell us?

Eyeworks (2024), Structural Learning (2021) and Arnerich (2021) emphasize that the Leuven scale tells us the children's level of engagement and concentration in what they were doing. It enables professionals to assess the engagement and well-being of children. According to this scale, children learn more effectively if they are content and self-assured. When they feel at ease in their surroundings, their wellbeing increases, and become more willing to try new things. It will be difficult for children to learn continuously and realise their full potential if they are uncomfortable in their surroundings. According to Structural learning (2021) a lack of involvement and wellbeing may indicate that a child development may be delayed. They may also have low wellbeing and frequently exhibit signs of fear, anxiety, and dependence. Furthermore, this scale also indicates that high levels of involvement can foster children's genuine interests, curiosity, and fascination, all of which contribute to high levels of learning (Eyeworks, 2024, and Structural Learning, 2021, Storli and Sandseter, 2019).

What won't it tell you?

The Leuven scale does not tell us the current happiness of the children or whether it is universally applicable across cultural contexts. It does not sufficiently address the need for specific learning outcomes. It also does not tell us how to do the scale with children with additional needs as the behaviours described in the scale are often not present or as obvious in Children with additional needs (Arnerich, 2021, Brodie, 2025, Learning Journals, 2025).

How does it drive quality?

As stated by Arnerich (2021) and Brodie (2025) the Leuven scale's observation and assessment components are crucial in promoting excellent quality in childcare settings.

Additionally, by using the scale, practitioners can verify that they are providing high-quality care and education while also advancing their reflective practice and gaining a deeper understanding of each child's development. In addition, MacRae and Jones (2020) confirm that using the Leuven scale as a measure of a high-quality learning environment helps practitioners go beyond the basic concepts of progressive child development and provides insights into the importance of involvement.

What information is needed to improve the provision?

Eyeworks (2024) suggests that in order to improve the Leuven scale and increase the opportunity for children to participate, practitioners should include fresh materials and activities that will spark children's interest. By rearranging areas and adding items to promote exploration, practitioners can make the atmosphere more enticing to the children. Along with determining their interests and offering activities that cater to them, practitioners can also recognise children who have developmental needs and help them build healthy relationships with others. In addition, Structural Learning (2021) say to enhance this, educators should use game-based learning to increase motivation and engagement, keep a learning journal to monitor children's progress, and modify their teaching strategies to suit each child's needs. Brodie (2025) claims that the development of digital tools could be useful to enhance the Leuven scale by making it easier to perform and document observations.

Conclusion

In summary, both approaches are observational tools utilised in early childhood settings to evaluate and enhance the quality of learning opportunities that emphasise children's engagement and well-being. Both approaches rely on teachers' observations of children's interactions and behaviours. Additionally, both approaches assist teachers in determining what aspects of their teaching require improvement. Both approaches support the provision of high-quality care and instruction for all children in educational settings.

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