

Reflective Paper

Quality

Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) (2024) explain that high quality childcare is considered essential for babies and young children to benefit from it. In order to provide children with the best start in life, it can be considered necessary to understand the factors that contribute to high quality care (Oxfordshire County Council, 2016). Bland (2024) states that it can be difficult to define quality in the early years as it is dependent on the individual's pedagogy, background, education, and personal viewpoints. Whereas Moss (2016), states that "quality was a choice, not a necessity". Higher-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) improves children's development later in life by improving their language abilities, improving their academic achievement, and increasing their positive behaviour and outcomes (Burchinal, 2017). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project discovered that there is a correlation between high quality pre-school care and enhanced social relationships and higher intellectual performance, as well as being better prepared for the challenges they meet on entry to school (Taggart *et al.*, 2015).

Prior to starting primary school, children's learning and development can be encouraged with high-quality early childhood education and care (Melhuish *et al.*, 2015). For this reason, in order to provide children with an excellent start in life, early childhood educators and settings should strive to deliver high-quality services (Welsh Government, 2023). Achieving quality in the early years however, can present difficulties (Butler, no date). For instance the variety of stakeholders in early years settings, including parents, educators, and children, implies that opinions on what defines quality practice can be subjective, due to also being based on individuals values (Moss, 2016). Practitioners' conceptions of quality, for instance, appear to be connected to the framework in which they place their personal and professional experiences together, whilst they are shaped by government legislation (Cottle and Alexander, 2012). However, Sollars (2020) explain that parents associate quality with the love and care given to the children; the interactions and communication between the settings and families; the happiness, welfare, and personal growth of the

children; and the setting's physical attributes (Cottle, 2013). Additionally, Palaiologou (2023) and Chalke (2013) highlight that understanding what quality means to parents can help settings and families work together more effectively and promote meaningful involvement to enhance the learning and development of young children.

A large part of a child's day is spent in learning environments where they engage with educators and other children (UNICEF, 2018). Birth to 5 Matters (2021) explain that this suggests possibilities for optimal development, including an emotionally safe and healthy environment, supportive interactions and relationships, stimulation, and time, are strongly influenced by the role of the adult and significant others in the children's lives. Staff expertise and comprehension of the curriculum, understanding how young children learn, and adult knowledge in supporting children are also quality determinants (Department for Education, 2023). Each of these factors are considered crucial to the overall quality of early childhood facilities (OECD, no date). Therefore, according to PACEY (2024a), in order to meet the needs of children, it is considered crucial to achieve a balance between offering rich and engaging play-based activities and adhering to curriculum targets and accountability standards.

Additionally, Ishimine and Taylor (2014) build on this and states that globally, two domains have been identified as including the qualities of ECEC 'structural quality', characteristics including staff-child ratios, group sizes, physical setting sizes, curricular frameworks, and minimum staff certifications are all considered characteristics of structural quality; and 'process quality', this covers elements such as the everyday interactions children have in the ECEC settings with other children, practitioners, families, the larger community, and the space and materials given (OECD, 2021; OECD, no date, A). Additionally, Eadie *et al.* (2022) explains that 'system quality' was recently recognised as a third area. System quality is determined by a number of variables, including programme and service investment levels, governance, and regulatory requirements (Torii, Fox, and Cloney 2017).

Moreover, standard 18 of The National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2023b, p.52) suggest that to ensure children and families are receiving high-quality services, early years settings have put efficient policies and quality assurance procedures in place, that are effectively monitored and maintained.

Quality Assurance

An aspect which is considered crucial of ensuring young children get the best possible start in their educational learning is quality assurance in ECEC (Welsh Government, 2023). Welsh Government (2023) explain that it includes a broad range of guidelines, practices, and policies that are intended to guarantee that ECEC settings provide young children with a secure, supportive, and developmentally appropriate environment. Furthermore, in order to help guarantee that children's positive experiences are not limited, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (no date) highlights the importance of having a high quality learning environment and emphasizes that the environment and integrated resources should be of the highest standard possible. Additionally, the implementation of quality assurance systems is considered essential to guarantee the monitoring and enforcement of standards, as well as the frequent collection and distribution of quality data to key stakeholders for the purpose of informing policy and decision-making and facilitating real-time improvements in early childhood education settings (UNICEF, 2020).

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)

According to von Suchodoletz *et al.* (2023), to raise the overall quality of early childhood education and care, it is considered essential to take into consideration advantages of utilising the techniques and resources to measure the current quality of setting, as well as discovering opportunities to enhance positive outcomes in the future. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) can be used as a tool, in reference to physical space, interactions, activities, and supplies that are available to children (Coventry City Council, no date). The ECERS is intended to rate the whole environment of early childhood settings, guided by the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project (Taggart *et al.* 2015).

The evaluation consists of a rating scale with 35 items divided into seven environmental subscales (PAKEYS, no date). Additionally, there are seven rankings for each item. The level of quality care that does not satisfy the requirements is ranked one, whereas excellent individualised care is ranked seven (Setodji,

Schaack, and Le, 2018). Brunsek *et al.* (2017) explain that a wide range of pre-schoolers' (aged three to five) requirements are the focus of the ECERS. It is recognised as a thorough evaluation method that assesses teacher-led interactions and environmental factors that impact young children's requirements in terms of their holistic development and the quality of settings (Warwickshire County Council, no date). However, (University of Alberta, 2012) explain that scores are based solely on a three hours observation period, whereas West Sussex County Council (2021) argue that it is considered an issue when children are not observed on a regular basis, or at different times of the day, and for an ideal amount of time. Therefore, one short observation period should not be used to determine all of a child's needs, and the level of quality within the provision (Neaum, 2016; Welsh Government, 2012).

Vermeer *et al.* (2016) explains that whilst using the ECERS, quality is not measured through structural indicators, such as staff-child ratio; group size; practitioner education; practitioner wages; and price of care. Illinois State Board of Education (no date) adds that although they set an example for quality, they cannot guarantee that the programme setting is providing high-quality treatment. Whereas the quality of process is assessed through the ECERS. Bukhalenkova, Almazova, and Aslanova, (2023) explain that this includes the interactions between staff and child, and child to child; resources and how they are used, as well as in the space provided; and the day's schedule. It is also considered important to note that it is local authority advisors that complete the ECERS (Estyn, 2015). This could lead to a biased result from the assessment, due to the perception of quality the assessor has (Mathers, Singler, and Karemaker, 2012).

Pauker *et al.* (2018) found that higher language and reasoning scores were associated with better learning outcomes, especially in language development, through the encouragement from practitioners and their communication. However, Early *et al.* (2018) argue that even without any staff involvement, if the learning area is of a high enough quality, a classroom could achieve the highest score possible on the ECERS.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS)

Sustained Shared Thinking is defined as “an episode in which two or more individuals ‘work together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend” (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Brodie, no date). The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project asked the question of ‘What does high quality look like’ and ‘How is it differentiated from ‘good’ quality?’. The report identified that compared to less effective settings, high quality and effective settings have a stronger impact on a child’s overall development. According to Hoare (no date) the SSTEWS scales expand upon ECERS by emphasising the adult's role in promoting learning and development and the pedagogy used in the setting. Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023) explain that in order to improve the quality of early childhood education and care, and to provide children with the best start in life for their future, the SSTEWS scale is a quality assurance tool. The SSTEWS scale is evaluated on a seven-point scale, similarly to the ECERS. Trust, confidence and independence, social and emotional well-being, supporting language and communication, supporting learning and critical thinking, and assessing language and learning are the five subscales that form the main themes of the scale (University of North Carolina, no date). This suggests that analysis of brief encounters can be challenging and result in a limited overview of the overall quality of the interactions, much like the ECERS scale.

According to Brodie (2024a), in order for high-quality sustained shared thinking to occur, staff members should first establish mutual trust and confidence before learning about the child's interests and comprehension. Purdon (2014) brings to attention the theory behind sustained shared thinking closely aligns with Vygotsky's work, which proposed that when a child receives help from an educator inside their "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), their learning can go beyond what they could do on their own. Howard *et al.* (2018) found that sustained shared thinking practices in early childhood practice are generally subpar. This suggests that there is a need to support and clarify practitioner understanding in relation to promoting sustained shared thinking and successful practice (Brodie, 2024).

According to Welsh Government (2023) high-quality early childhood education can help parents from a variety of backgrounds and lessen socioeconomic disparities. Additionally, Nutbrown (2012) asserts that both economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children can benefit from and interact with high-quality early childhood programmes. Thus, in order to reduce the disparity between economic disparities, the SSTEWS scale can be utilised to encourage improvements and increase quality within settings (Department for Education, 2020).

Conclusion

In summary, the development of social skills, emotional stability, academic success, and the freedom to play and explore all depend on receiving high-quality care (Welsh Government, 2023a). Children have the right to high-quality play and educational opportunities that will allow them to grow and succeed (Department for Education, 2023). Furthermore, despite certain obstacles, quality assurance initiatives such as the SSTEWS and ECERS scales have been shown to be successful in improving children's positive outcomes and high-quality experiences between disparities in economic status.

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