

QUALITY IN THE EARLY YEARS SETTINGS

‘Quality is complex, as are the children that attend early years services.’

Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016)

According to the Orford English Dictionary (2023), quality refers to the standard of excellence demonstrated by someone, or something compared to similar instances. Correspondingly, Singh *et al.* (2023) claim that quality is important because it guarantees that products or services meet or exceed customer needs, increases satisfaction and loyalty, and promotes trust and credibility because consistently high-quality offerings reflect dependability and competency. Additionally, quality improves operational efficiency by minimising mistakes, rework, and waste, resulting in lower costs and increased productivity.

Additionally, according to Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016), quality in the Early Years is a multifaceted combination of structural and process characteristics, which, on the one hand, supports modernist approaches to measurable and assessable quality aspects. On the other hand, it encompasses intangible aspects, such as behavioural and emotional features, that guide leaders and practitioners in enhancing the quality of early childhood services and influence parents in their decision-making.

Furthermore, the Foundation Years (2024) underscores that quality improvement is a collaborative endeavour. It ensures that all settings and experts engage in evaluating how to create, maintain, and enhance services to offer the best learning and development opportunities for all children and their families. Moreover, quality improvement is a continuous process that involves planning, implementing, reviewing, and assessing. It is an ongoing journey that necessitates the active participation of children, parents, and specialists. Also, leadership plays a vital role in quality improvement, and leaders should have processes for self-evaluation, plans to identify and agree upon improvement priorities, plans to implement the objectives, and reviews of the impact that the actions have made, as can be seen in the leadership meeting which took place on 15 of April.

According to Iles (2019), the availability of high-quality settings is paramount for children due to its profound influence on their overall growth and well-being. Given this,

Lambert, Abbott-Shim, and Sibley (2014) assert that high-quality settings, carefully designed by committed educators, offer opportunities to stimulate activities and interactions, fostering excellent growth and learning outcomes. These educators, often highly qualified and compassionate, apply developmentally appropriate methods that encourage the development of abilities like critical thinking, investigation, and curiosity. Most importantly, they prioritise individualised attention and support, ensuring that each child's unique needs and interests are met. Stronge (2018) also claims that access to high-quality settings significantly impacts cognitive and academic benefits and social and emotional development. In view of this, knowledgeable educators foster children's interactions with their peers, which is how children acquire essential social skills such as cooperation, empathy, and resolving conflicts. Moreover, understanding the environment in high-quality settings helps cultivate emotional resilience and self-regulation, essential abilities for navigating life's obstacles, according to Allen and Kelly B.B. (2015). In the same way, Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) mention that by investing in the highest possible quality of early childhood education, educators can prepare a generation of resilient, competent, and compassionate individuals who are well-prepared to contribute positively to the world.

Furthermore, McCowan (2016) asserts that equity considerations underscore the importance of guaranteeing that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location, have access to high-quality settings. This not only benefits the individual child but also has the potential to transform society. Giving children from disadvantaged backgrounds a solid educational foundation that enables them to thrive intellectually and socially can reduce the achievement gap and contribute to a more equitable society. Therefore, Burchinal (2018) asserts that ensuring children can access such settings is vital to maximise their potential and establish the groundwork for future success. However, the journey towards achieving quality in early childhood settings is a collaborative and constantly adapting endeavour, necessitating a comprehensive approach that values the contributions of various strategies and methods, and using extra methods and tools to improve and increase this quality has several benefits for the children and the educators involved.

It follows that using different methods and tools within Early Years settings, such as NDNA (National Day Nurseries Association), PACEY (Professional Association for Child-care and Early Years), Early Years Wales, ITERS (Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale), ECERS (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale), SSTEWS (Sustained Shared

Thinking and Emotional Well-being), LEUVEN, and BEEL, helps cultivate a culture of introspection and continuous improvement. That implies that to improve the overall quality of education, educators are encouraged to conduct critical evaluations of their practices, identify areas of strength and areas that require improvement, and implement specific interventions, according to Darling-Hammond (2020). In addition, Lee (2018) claims that additional methods and tools promote innovation and creativity in Yearly Years settings. Given this, educators can build dynamic and engaging learning environments that accommodate each child's specific requirements and interests if they are determined to embrace new ideas and different techniques. Moreover, through new teaching practices, the incorporation of technology, or the production of engaging learning resources, a culture of curiosity, discovery, and learning that continues throughout all of life can be fostered in Early Years settings.

Additionally, Jones and Palikara (2023) sustain that the effective utilisation of less formal approaches, such as questionnaires for parents, children, and stakeholders, as well as suggestion boxes and parent evenings, serves as a powerful tool for gathering feedback and insights from key stakeholders. This inclusive approach allows Early Years educators to gain a deeper understanding of the needs, preferences, and potential areas for improvement of the children, parents, and other stakeholders. This suggests that by actively seeking their opinions, this collaborative approach not only strengthens partnerships with families but also acknowledges and appreciates their role in shaping the quality of care and education delivered to their children.

Furthermore, according to Richter *et al.* (2017), guaranteeing and improving the quality of education provided throughout the Early Years is paramount to promoting young children's overall growth and development. The Leuven Scale and SSTEW (Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being) are two examples of methods that stand out in analysing and improving quality approaches. Each scale has specific advantages and disadvantages that set it apart, and both are used to evaluate the environment in which children are raised.

Firstly, according to Melhuish and Gardiner (2018), SSTEW is a comprehensive tool for evaluating and enhancing childcare settings for school-age children. This report evaluates six core domains: Space and Furnishings, Activities, Interactions, Staffing, Leadership and Management, and Environment. At the same time, SSTEW's most significant advantage is its holistic approach, which considers various environmental, interactional, and managerial factors and enables educators to identify areas of excellence that need improvement across various

dimensions. Moreover, Siraj Kingston and Melhuish (2023) claim that the SSTEW technique strongly emphasises fostering positive interactions between children and adults, cultivating sustained shared thinking, and promoting emotional well-being within the learning environment, and this focus ensures that students feel supported, engaged, and emotionally secure, enhancing the relational aspect of education. This, in turn, boosts the overall effectiveness of the technique. Also, SSTEW creates an environment favourable to the individual's holistic development by encouraging meaningful connections and reflective practice among educators.

However, Wieduwilt, Lehl, and Anders (2023) sustain that the SSTEW scale might not consider certain essential elements of quality service, such as different educational approaches or structural aspects of the environment. Furthermore, despite its emphasis on emotional well-being, it might not offer insights into other vital aspects of development, such as cognitive or physical growth, which are equally important.

Secondly, according to Rintakorpi and Reunamo (2017), the Leuven Scale is a practical tool for evaluating the many facets of quality in Early Years settings, and it goes beyond surface-level assessments, considering well-being, participation, and socio-emotional development. Like SSTEW, this adaptability allows educators to identify areas that need improvement and implement tailored interventions, promoting a comprehensive approach to quality assurance. In the context of well-being, it examines the child's general happiness, security, and comfort within the learning environment. It also investigates the child's emotional equilibrium, physical wellness, and activity participation. Moreover, the Leuven Scale places a significant emphasis on socio-emotional development, a central component of growth during the early years of life. It follows that it delves into the child's social competence and emotional resilience, considering aspects such as the child's ability to manage their emotions, communicate effectively, and form positive relationships with both their peers and adults. Therefore, the development of robust socio-emotional well-being, which encompasses empathy, cooperation, and resilience, is a key focus within this dimension, as emphasised by Lewis and Rees (2018).

At the same time, MacRae and Jones (2023) assert that the scale examines involvement, indicating the degree to which children are actively engaged and driven within their educational circumstances. This dimension can gauge a person's level of interest and involvement in the educational journey, delving into their curiosity, focus, persistence, and enjoyment of activities.

However, while comprehensive, MacRae and Jones (2023) claim that the Leuven Scale poses significant challenges in terms of implementation. Given this, its broad nature often requires extensive time and resources for a thorough examination, and its complexity can lead to subjective interpretations, potentially affecting the accuracy of assessments in various settings. As a result, these challenges highlight the necessity of an integrated approach, and it is essential to balance various strategies for a more efficient improvement in provision. In view of this, a more comprehensive understanding can be achieved by integrating the SSTEWS approach with the Leuven Scale. This combination offers valuable insights into different aspects of quality, addressing both the relational and structural aspects of quality service, and meeting the diverse needs of children and educators.

Correspondingly, Holland and Doherty (2016) argue that combining the SSTEWS approach with the Leuven Scale allows educators to acquire deeper understanding of quality service. Such a complete understanding can considerably support educators adopt better decisions, resulting in more efficient provision.

While the SSTEWS and Leuven scales are valuable tools for assessing children's social and emotional development, it is also vital for educators to recognise their limitations. These scales may not capture all aspects of individual differences among children, nor do they always consider the various environmental factors that influence social and emotional behaviour. However, when used with other assessment tools, such as interviews or observations, they can significantly enrich an educator's understanding of a child's development. This holistic approach allows for a deeper comprehension of a child's unique journey, highlighting the static nature of these scales, which may only partially reflect the dynamic nature of development over time (Hayes, 2023). Additionally, Palaiologou (2016) states that these tools are essential in promoting quality education because they enable informed decision-making. Educators use the information obtained by these methods with purposeful precision, using their findings to shape their teaching practices. With an acute focus on individual student profiles, they identify areas of strength and areas that require work in social and emotional development. This detailed understanding guides the development of personalised support plans suited to each learner's specific needs. Teachers can also get a more nuanced view of areas of strength and areas they could improve by triangulating information from numerous sources, allowing for focused interventions and continual provision development.

Moreover, this complete approach improves the academic version and fosters emotional resilience and interpersonal skills, both essential for long-term success. Therefore, educators can use the information gained from these scales as essential tools to help every student reach their full potential. Educators can guarantee that Early Years settings continue to be dynamic, responsive, and conducive to optimal child development by utilising these methods with additional data sources and cultivating a culture of continuous improvement. Also, they can build a culture of holistic development by including social and emotional assessments into their larger educational practice framework, according to Bendini and Devercelli (2022).

In conclusion, the SSEW and Leuven scales provide useful insights into children's social and emotional development. However, educators must consider the limits of these scales and make optimal decisions based on the information presented in conjunction with other assessment data and contextual factors. By efficiently utilising this information, educators can foster their students' social and emotional development and contribute to improving educational quality.

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