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# LEADERSHIP FOR SYSTEMS OF QUALITY

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EAEE6003/C

This essay focuses on quality assurance within the early years and systems that help promote and develop provision and service being provided. The essay discusses what is quality assurance and why it is important by relating to two systems of quality assurance. The systems will be discussed, critiqued and compared by relating back to practice and how they benefit managers within early years settings. The barriers that are faced and how to maintain best practice will also be discussed, which will be related to informing improved practice which will be discussing the importance of staff and their professional self-development.

According to Vroeijenstijn (2006) quality assurance can be described as a systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality processes, and is essential to the success of any organisation. Alternatively, Srinivasan and Kurey (2014) implies that quality is not just about working towards a set of standards but is an attitude and a way of working which innately improves service and forms part of an organisation's culture.

Behrstock & Clifford (2010) believes that customers, also known as stakeholders, are the driving force behind quality assurance, therefore, it is vital to obtain their feedback in order to provide a high standard of service. The purpose of feedback from customers is to obtain information on their experience of the service, and if they think improvements or changes could be implemented (Bennett et al., 2003). As a result, customer feedback should be an on-going process that will assist towards providing a first-class customer service. Furthermore, due to the nature of the business, where stringent inspections from external bodies and the need to attract funding from a variety of sources are commonplace, quality assurance is inevitable in order for the service to survive. However, ultimately, funding and inspections filter down to the customer and form part of the customers' experience (Cremer & Knippenberg, 2002). It is clear that quality assurance and feedback from customers and other stakeholders, is vital to the business. Moreover, acting on the feedback and implementing improvements and change will engage customers, with the purpose of customer retention, and of course, attracting new ones (Knapp et al., 2003). The intention is to create a culture where quality assurance is customary, and this can be achieved through the Deming Cycle (Deming, 1986) of Plan, Do, Check Act.

Early Years (2018) believes that quality assurance is essential so that management can ensure a consistent quality output, whilst continually assessing feedback to make changes on an incremental or radical basis. In addition, the process of self-assessment and self-evaluation, identifies the strengths and weaknesses within the setting, and from this an action plan can be produced and implemented. Similarly, the benefit of producing an action plan provides a set of measures that can be benchmarked against over a set period. These quality assurance tools will help provide a cycle of continuous improvement, with the intention of embedding the cycle into the organisation's culture.

Early years educational settings must follow the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2016a) which are issued under the Care Standards Act 2000. These standards are in line with the inspection and registration by the Regulatory bodies, such as Estyn, Flying Start and CIW. These are known as minimum standards, designed to help providers meet regulations relevant to the service they provide. However, many settings will aspire to exceed them in various ways in order to provide best practice.

There are many schemes and systems in place to provide early years settings with optional criteria alongside the National Minimum Standards for best practice. One of these systems is the Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS), which was implemented into the early year's industry by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) in 2016. Childcare providers are required to complete the SASS form on an annual basis; this entails a self-assessment of the setting and an annual review of the quality of care that is being provided. This information will inform CIW with the current levels of service, and will be used for inspection, monitoring, reviewing and improvement purposes, thus ensuring a minimum standard of care (Play Wales, 2018).

The SASS form is compulsory and must be completed by all registered childcare providers. Moreover, it acts as a reflective quality assurance management tool, which will provide the manager with a strategic framework by helping identify the strengths and weaknesses within the setting, and to determine the most appropriate direction for improvement (Black et al., 2003). The self-evaluation is pivotal to maintain, improve and create a service which meets a high standard of safe, quality childcare and play, with the intention of offering the best experience for children, and

to contribute to their well-being. Additionally, this form fulfils the legal duty under regulation 16 of the Child Minding and Day Care (Wales) Regulations 2010.

The SASS form assists the setting with meeting the legal requirements of the National Minimum Standards, and also informs CIW with any additional systems or schemes that the setting provides, with the aim of achieving best practice. Billing (2003), states that the structured approach provides an excellent framework, and is beneficial, as it presents the manager with a viewpoint of the setting's operations from a different angle. Similarly, Breneman & David, (2005) suggests that annotating information, facilitates the manager by identifying the current provision of service and how it can improve its strategic position.

The SASS form must be completed on an annual basis, therefore this enables the manager to evaluate and benchmark against the goals set in the previous year. Benchmarking is an important tool within quality assurance as it helps managers, leaders and practitioners monitor improvement (Cohen et al., 2014). Gaubert (2000) identifies benchmarking as a process of the reflection and reviewing of a provision, this enables a setting to identify best practice in relation to its processes. In addition, Crow et al., (2011) implies that a self-reflection form has positive connotations, as it allows the manager to compare the current service level against the preceding self-reflection assessment. Respectively, Kegan & Lahey (2001) states the importance of accurate information gathering within the setting's personal SASS form, in order to obtain precise results.

As far as external benchmarking is concerned, Crow et al., (2011) identifies that benchmarking against competitors has the potential to become challenging, as some organisations compete within a very competitive saturated marketplace, and this can produce a high volume of data gathering. Brown & Reilly (2009) concurs that external benchmarking does indeed have its drawbacks, as the need to ensure the external data gathered is correct can become time consuming. As a result this can put pressure on the manager, as the need to operate the setting on a daily basis can become compromised. It is of course, paramount for the manager to strategically consider its position within the industry, so that the setting and the service it provides has a sustainable competitive advantage. However, the operational processes must also be

met on a daily basis. It is clear therefore, the manager has to gain a balance on a strategic and operational level when considering its external environment.

The SASS form uses qualitative data which enables CIW to gather in depth information, thus providing an increased knowledge of the topic. D'Andrea & Gosling (2005) states that using qualitative data brings a depth of understanding to the information provided, which can help improve childcare provision and promote best practice. However, Henry (2008) states that qualitative data, can be difficult to analyse and process, as it is not concerned with facts and figures, and can be subjective by nature. Johnson et al., (2008) implies that qualitative data collects large amounts of information and this may be more beneficial to the self-reflection element of the form. However, Miliband (2004) believes that the use of one data type in isolation does not provide a true in-depth reflection of the service. Therefore, Miliband (2004) suggests it would be prudent to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, as it can improve evaluation through the limitations of one type of data against the strengths of another. Therefore, providing transparency and making it easier to measure quality standards and processes, consequently contributing towards the cycle of continuous improvement.

Another system that promotes best practice within childcare settings is the Environmental Rating Scales (UNC, 2017). The Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) is created to assess the quality of the provision provided by the setting. Throughout the inspection, observations are made on multiple areas within the setting and the use of quantitative data is implemented to gather information. The information is calculated by inspectors, which is then analysed to provide the setting with an overall rating. Kent (2005) concurs that the use of quantitative data allows the process of measuring and analysing easier.

Monk & Ryding (2007) believes that the ERS process does not have to be carried out by early year's educational providers. However, Zsoke (2007) suggests that it is best practice to do so. Zsoke (2007) also suggests that the ERS within a setting can reveal where improvement is required. According to Collings & Wood (2009), the ERS can be utilised as a self-reflection tool, as well as a professional system. The manager can make use of the ERS as a 'go-to tool' as it can assist with improvements by potentially producing a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPI's)

that can be utilised in preparation for the subsequent annual inspection. However, Gloet (2006) infers, this can be demanding for the provider if high standards are not being attained. Hislop (2005) suggests that this tool works better when used professionally, as it ultimately leads to an action plan, where the setting must meet the standards as set out in the plan within the next inspectorate year. However, according to Massingham (2008), an annual professional inspection may not benefit best practice within the setting, as an action plan is provided to be implemented within one year, which according to Wenger et al., (2002) is too long, as other areas may suffer resulting in a rating decrease.

The ERS have been implemented within early years settings to provide managers with a rating together with the level of provision they are delivering. Blömeke et al., (2010) states that this tool is beneficial as it is a less formal way of self-reflection. This means that not only managers and leaders, but other staff and practitioners can access this as a self-progression tool. As each practitioner is given one area of the setting to progress, Dolton & Marcenaro-Gutierrez (2011) suggests that this will help them follow the outcomes, which will encourage and promote best practice alongside self-development.

Quality assurance is beneficial, as it enables managers to choose systems which add value to their particular setting. The SASS form and ERS are appropriate systems for all early years' settings, as they encourage self-reflection, which leads to the progression and development of service provision. Furlong (2013) suggests that these systems are easily adaptive to any setting, whereas others maybe too structured. Similarly Wang et al., (2003) states that other quality assurance tools may not offer the same standard of reflection, which can have an impact on the setting's future progression. Furthermore, the above mentioned systems have the benefit of utilising the annual report. This report enables managers to internally benchmark, which is a useful device in providing best practice on a daily basis, in order to produce a high quality output, which will hopefully lead to business progression (Tatto, 2013).

Providers face many issues when undertaking quality assurance, one of these issues is due to the changing of legislation of policies and procedures in Wales, where changes in settings have been made to the curriculum. Namely; The ALN Bill – Additional Learning Needs Transformation Programme (Welsh Government, 2018a),

changes in Successful Futures Report (Professor Graham Donaldson, 2015), Well-being of Future Generations Act (Welsh Government, 2016b), Prosperity for All Strategy (Welsh Government, 2017a) and the 30-hour childcare offer. These changes must be implemented within the setting which may create barriers and difficulties when trying to undertake quality assurance alongside the implantation of new policies and procedures, which can be time consuming when embedding into the system and could prove to be challenging.

Fortunately, the changes in policies within Wales are gradually implemented into settings. However, there is one change that needs to be promptly implemented, the 30-hour free childcare offer (Welsh Government, 2017b). Throughout this change, it is important for managers to ensure that quality assurance standards are maintained, as there is little time for implementation and familiarity with this new scheme.

By delivering the 30-hour free childcare offer within early year's settings, it is providing continuity of care for children. Manning-Morton (2014) highlights the importance of how it enables children to develop a positive, integrated sense of self. This is reinforced by Bowlby (1988 cited in Manning-Morton 2014) and his attachment theory of how children's relationships with caregivers is fundamental to a child's health and well-being. According to PACEY (2018) there is no further training required in order to offer the free childcare. However, there are implications of having extra children to care for. Perlman et al. (2017) explains that better ratios are believed to improve child outcomes; as a smaller ratio is likely to give children more opportunities for interaction. However, the 'Technical Note' from the Welsh Government (2018b), which was devised from data sources and methodology to establish the fee, states that there is an uncertainty as to whether other elements such as food and outings is included in the price, and it remains at the discretion of individual settings to charge a 'top up' for snacks and trips. However, this charge needs to be in accordance with Welsh Government guidelines.

Darling (1992) implies that a manager, who is implementing a quality assurance system into their organisation, will need to inspire a group of individuals to become enthusiastic followers in the achievement of the organisation's goals. This suggests that employee engagement is pivotal to the success of an effective quality management system. Furthermore, Deming (1986) believed that if a system is to be

managed effectively, then the aim of the organisation should be clear to everyone. Therefore, the manager's aim is to create a culture where members of staff infuse quality into their daily routines. This can assist staff to continually think about how processes can be changed or improved, and in turn, this can help towards their journey of self and professional development (Crawford, 2005).

Staff development is an important part of quality assurance. Therefore an effective quality training program is necessary to ensure that members of staff who implement and assess procedures are equipped with the necessary skills to carry out their responsibilities. As a result, a development plan should form part of the performance appraisal process, which will help develop skills, confidence and levels of industry knowledge (Politis, 2002).

To conclude, there are many systems and quality assurance tools that can be utilised. However, quality assurance is everyone's responsibility, Deming (1986) and ultimately it is the manager's role to involve staff at every level of the organisation. This will provide a shared desire to improve processes and outcomes in a continuous manner. Furthermore the driving force behind quality is customer feedback, as customer satisfaction is paramount to the long term survival of the organisation. As far as child-care settings are concerned, there are rigorous legal processes that need to be adhered to, and this can benefit the setting as it coerces the organisation into following a set of procedures and processes. However, it would be prudent for the manager to build upon these to ensure quality assurance goes above and beyond legal requirements. This will assist in the delivery of a quality service on a continuous basis, thus providing the organisation with that all important competitive edge and sustainability within the industry they operate.

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