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Reflective Paper

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The idea of quality in early years childhood education and care (ECEC) is complicated and influenced by many processes and outcome factors. (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; Katz, 1993) Statutory frameworks such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) create a standard baseline, there is developing acknowledgement that reaching high quality services entail involvement with quality assurance methods. (DfE, 2021) These methods encompass formal accreditation systems as well as professional developmental tools that are developed and learned by research carried out. (OECD, 2012; Melhuish, 2015)

This reflective paper gives a critical analysis of the advantages and the disadvantages in line with surpassing statutory requirements by implementing quality assurance methods. I specifically reflect on two primary categories, quality assurance certificates such as an NDNA, quality first and WPPA quality for all, and evidence-based assessment instruments such as Environment rating scales (ERS) and sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing scales (SSTEW). By critically reflection, this paper investigates the impact of these methods on the practice, on professional development and the outcomes of the children.

Statutory frameworks give a fundamental level of educational and safety resources, but they are not meant to encourage excellence (Tickell, 2011). NutBrown (2012) argues the quality of early years education is forever changing, calling for continuous reflection and assessment. It is greatly recognized that quality should be evaluated through different approached over a lengthy period, instead of depending only on results from an inspection. (Urban *et al.*, 2012)

In my opinion, legal frameworks regularly emphasize attachment, all the while quality assurance methods encourage reflective and research-based practices. This differentiation is significant: compliance guarantees basic standards, where quality assurance promotes ongoing improvements. (Foundation Years, 2020)

In addition, quality improvement is defined as an ongoing cycle of planning, execution, and assessments of practices. This constant process is closely even with models of reflective practice such as Bronfenbrenner's (1979), emphasizing the importance of continued evaluation over isolated assessments.

One key advantage is the focus on ongoing enhancement. Initiatives such as NDNA, merge a process of reflection and assessments through their whole team, trying to motivate practitioners to see their strengths and the areas they need to improve for their own development. (NDNA, 2022)

Research shows that environments taking part in quality enhancement actions show enhanced inspection results and above norm child outcomes. (Mathers *et al.*, 2014; Sylva *et al.*, 2014) With this found, I agree that systematic frameworks allow guidance and clarity, allowing practitioners to progress from intuition to evidence based improvement and growth.

However, it is important to also recognise that these frameworks pass on into m compliance activities if they are not carried out correctly and with the right goal or intent in place. The success is very much determined by the involvement and teamwork of both the leadership and staff. (Campell-Barr, 2017)

Quality assurance tools often include professional development, which is of the upmost importance for enhancing practice. For example, accreditation programmes call for practitioners to take part in training, reflection and assessments. (Urban *et al.*, 2012; Whitebread, 2012)

This supports the idea that the deliverance of high-quality services relies on an able and informed workforce. For examples SSTEW explicitly necessitates that practitioners have a comprehension of a child's development and educational mythologies, underscoring the importance and input of professional expertise. (Siraj *et al.*, 2015) This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructuctivism which emphasises the importance of adult-led interaction in supporting learning.

From my own reflective practice, I have seen that when practitioners take part actively in quality enhancement initiatives, there is a clear noticeability in motivation and proudness of practice. Although there are also several obstacles that do present, such as staff confidence, staff education, workloads, timeframes, and occasionally policies and procedures. (Fenech, 2011)

The main idea of quality assurance is to improve results for children in the care of the practitioners. (Melhuish, 2015; EPPE 2004) Studies do demonstrate a very high correlation between early years education and care (ECEC) and enhances social and cognitive development.

Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) for example, assess multiple dimensions of quality, including learning environments and interactions, which are liked to developmental outcomes (Harms *et al.*, 2015) SSTEW offers efficient methods for investigating and examining interactions but. Mainly focus on adult-child interactions. (Siraj *et al.*, 2015)

Reflectively, this underscores the need of transcending superficial contributions such as resources to highlight the quality of processes, especially the process of adult-child interactions. (Calrke-Stewart, 1998)

Accreditation programmes offer outsider proof of quality. This helps with working with parents and gaining their trust and confidence. (Elliot, 2006) Obtaining a recognized quality certification can also show a clear commitment to excellence and transparency.

For example, a quality certification can help settings stand out. It allows the setting to show that keeping high standards daily and how this then helps with the overall development. This is very important in early year childcare facilities, where there is a high number of early year settings, and parents may need to consider all possible pros and cons before choosing their 'right' one.

One big concern people have is whether these awards really show how good the practice is, or if they just serve the purpose of meeting assessment standards. This means that some might think the awards are more about checking off a list of requirements rather than truly recognising quality work. As Moss (2016) pointed out, this raises questions about the real value of such awards. Are they truly meaningful, or are they just a way for organisations to say they have met the criteria? It's important to consider these questions when looking at awards and their impact on practice.

Quality assurance marks provide a clear assessment in reviewing current practice and always working on how to develop and make improvements. The usually include on-going cycles of development, the involvement of the setting as a whole, every practitioner, the needs of the children and parents, and external validation. (NDA, 2022)

These features help to create consistency and a shared understanding among the staff, not only internal staff but the multi-agency staff that link in with the setting also.

Reflecting on my own practice, I would argue that these frameworks work well with encouraging the staff to work well together and have the ability to work together to share the responsibility of the needs of the setting. (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002)

Although these benefits, quality assurance marks also have drawbacks. Financial limits and access can be an obstacle, as smaller setting may find it much harder to secure accreditation. (Fenech, 2011)

Performativity is also a risk, where settings focus so much on winning the award rather than actual following through and making the real improvements needed for the setting to thrive and meet these high standards. (Campell-Barr, 2017) Also, frameworks may not fully reflect the wide range of requirements. (Hujala *et al.*, 2013)

It is also very important to understand that the quality of something can be influenced by outside factors. This means that quality does not only come from careful thinking and the right practice. External factors can include things like the environment, the tools being used, or even the people involved. These outside influences can play a big role in how positive or negative something can be. While being thoughtful and practicing, it is important we pay attention to these other factors that can affect quality.

ERS tools (ECERS-R and ECERS -E) are widely used research methods to measure quality in areas, such as learning opportunities, physical environment and different interactions. (Harms *et al.*, 2015) They provide a clear and structured way to assess the quality and compare a number of settings.

Research shows ERS scores relate to children's development, indicating their validity. (Sylva *et al.*, 2004)

However, ERS has face criticism for focusing too much on structure, being labour-intensive and complex, and not able to appropriately capture and reflect on the quality of interactions. (Clarke-Stewart, 1998)

I do acknowledge that although ERS offers significant insights, it may not completely capture the relational aspects of practice. Additionally, the tool can be time consuming and require extra training to use effectively (Fench, 2011)

SSTEW addresses gaps in ERS by focusing on the interaction between adults and children, emotional health and prolonged collaborative thinking. (Siraj *et al.*, 2015) It stresses pedagogy and the role of practitioners in helping in the facilitating of learning and development.

This aligns closely with Vygotsky's (1978) theory highlighting the role of social interaction in learning. Personally, SSTEW corresponds with my personal view and experience, that quality is relational and based on interactions. It encourages practitioners to deeply engage in children's thinking and learning.

SSTEW like every other has its challenges of course, such as needed highly trained assessors which may limit accessibility (Fenech, 2011) it can be subjective, not

exactly compliant with every setting, as some settings may not be ready for its advanced ideas and hard to apply consistently. (Siraj-Baltchford, 2009)

Programmes like BEEL aim to improve care for children in the very beginning of their life, in the age range of birth to three years old using reflective research-based practices. (Abbott and Langston, 2005)

These approaches support holistic development and align with theories of attachment and emotional wellbeing (Dowling, 2014)

Reflecting on this, I consider these methods to be beneficial for overall development support in early years, but the success does depend on good leadership, supportive leadership, positive setting and staff and staff training (Urban *et al.*, 2012).

By researching and analysing these methods, I feel I have developed a deeper understanding on the intricacies involved in quality withing early years. The main point I acknowledge is that no single tool can capture all aspects of quality. Rather, it is important to adopt a combination of strategies to gather a holistic perspective. (Katz, 1993)

I have also recognised the importance of critical reflection when applying these tools. Without reflecting, quality assurance becomes a risk of becoming a simple procedural task more than the meaningful developmental need it was made for. I also have also gained a deeper understanding of the conflict between standardisation and contextualisation, accountability and professional autonomy, and measurement anad lived experience. (Hujala *et al.*, 2013)

These tensions highlight the very importance of a balanced approach that values both evidence-based frameworks and the knowledge of practitioners. (Hujala *et al.*, 2013)

Additional quality assurance methods are vital for promoting and ensuring quality that goes beyond legal requirements. They provide structured frameworks for reflection, professional development, and continuous improvement, which ultimately enhance developmental and wellbeing outcomes for children.

Although, these methods do have some limitations. Their effectiveness depends on how they are implemented and the extent to which they are integrated into a reflective child cantered practice.

It is important to understand that quality assurance should not be seen as a final goal, but instead as an ongoing journey. By employing a range of tools and methods,

practitioners in early years education and development can develop a deeper comprehension of quality, ensuring that the settings offer and address the needs, of the children in their care along with the parents' needs as a holistic overview of the child.

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