What is quality?

The idea of ‘quality’ is hard to comprehend. As the concept of the term is not specific or transparent (Whitebread, Kuvalja, and O’Connor, 2015: Palaiologou, 2023), it is perceived and interpreted in a lot of ways, suggests Pelatti *et al.* (2016) and Saglam *et al*. (2023). Cottle and Alexander (2012) claim children’s parents, early years practitioners, management team, and children all have their own opinions of what quality means to them individually. Quality can be defined in representation of each person's responsibilities and actions, state Mathers, Singler, and Karemaker (2012).

Many studies, such as Ho *et al*. (2010), Dalli, *et al.* (2011), Welsh Government (2014), Welsh Government (2022) and more, suggest similar ideas about what quality is and says it is seen through the 2 features that are pivotal to young children and their development.

Ho, *et al*. (2010) explain that quality is perceived through structural processes. In the early years, this relates to how professional progression, assistance (Whitebread, Kuvalja and O’ Connor 2015; Eadie, *et al*., 2022), the ratios between adults and children, the scope, qualified staff members, and policies are maintained (Dalli, *et al*. 2011; Singler, 2012; Grammatikopoulos, *et al*., 2017). Ho *et al*. (2010) also suggest that the formation of the building, and how the environment is maintained are two of the structural processes that is seen as what quality is, as well as how things are dealt with and done, like involving and working in partnership with parents (Eadie *et al.,* 2022) and the systems in place. For example, official requirements outlined in lawful regulations (Eadie *et al*., 2022) or structured arrangements like routines and the planning of appropriate activities (Grammatikopoulos *et al.,* 2017). According to the Welsh Government (2023) these are referred to as the 3 enablers that contribute towards the provision of high quality within early years setting.

In more recent research Welsh Government (2014) similarly suggests the same as Ho *et al.* (2010) however, also explains that quality can be driven through legal requirements outlined in lawful regulations. On the other hand, in compliance with Moss (2016) quality is an action done out of choice rather than being necessary. It is a choice that is influenced by what is wanted and constructed through personal desirability and thoughts (Moss, 2016). On the other hand, according with Cottle and Alexander (2012) quality is valued and influenced through goals and targets that are

to be achieved. Both aspects of what quality is are in conjunction with one another (Ho *et al.,* 2010; Welsh Government, 2014).

Why is quality important?

For children to develop and have the best start to childhood, the providence of high-quality care and services are vital (PACEY, 2024). As, in compliance with Welsh Government (2023) children's first years is a critical period for their early growth and development and the functioning of their brain. Furthermore, the experiences children go through, those adults they are around and the environment they are within throughout their early childhood will impact their health, wellbeing as they get older and future (Welsh Government, 2023). As well as set the foundation for continuous learning (Eadie, et al. 2022) and influence children's developmental stages (Melhuish, 2016).

High quality provision in accordance with Ho, *et al.* (2010) is pivotal for children's language, cognitive, social and intellectual abilities as well as their academic future. High quality provision can also help to stop children with learning difficulties from deteriorating claims Ho, *et al.* (2010). Moreover, in accordance with Welsh Government (2023) the influence of high-quality provision is vital for children's future social skills, it impacts their abilities of socialising within a greater community in their future supporting them economically. Welsh Government (2023) also suggests that high quality is essential to children's emotional development as they develop resilience, it can improve children's abilities to cope and deal with challenges that they may encounter as they get older. Additionally, according to Melhuish (2016), Grammatikopoulos, *et al.* (2017) and Eadie, *et al.* (2022) high quality provision is essentially necessary as the benefits supports and has greater impacts on children and their families that are from a low-income background. It improves the children from disadvantaged areas behaviour claims Grammatikopoulos, *et al*. (2017).

ECERS

In addition to undergoing inspections to improve quality (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2022; Care Inspectorate Wales, 2024), Singler (2012) states there are further systems that can be obtained to assess quality. Meeting the requirement of standard 18.1 within the NMS (Welsh Government, 2023).

In compliance with Neitzel, *et al*. (2019) the Quality Rating and enhancement system is available to increase quality. Within the Quality Rating and Improvement system, the Environmental Rating Scales according with Singler (2012) are one of the approaches used. These rating scales, for example ECERS, ECERS- R and ECERS – 3, in accordance with Grammatikopoulos, *et al*. (2017) and Neitzel *et al.* (2019) are the most utilised models, used around the world.

In accordance with Hestenes, *et al.* (2019), ECERS was introduced in 1980 and is a tool that has been operating the longest. It was initially in place to support staff within early year settings identify their abilities and limitations, as well as to collate information (Hestene, *et al.* 2019). ECERS, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale according with Neitzel *et al*. (2019) is amended to the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised, ECERS – R. Which was amended eight years later (Hestenes, *et al.* 2019).

ECERS – R is an assessment tool that analyses quality in early year settings that provide care and education for children from the ages of two to five years (Singler, 2012). Maintained by Singler (2012) the ECERS – R tool measures and reviews quality within classrooms through observations undertaken by experienced advisors. Within the ECERS – R assessment, to assess quality there are 43 standards under seven smaller divisions that assessors use as a benchmark and rates against (Setodji, Schaack, and Le, 2017). Gordon, *et al.* (2012) describe these standards as a list of items that are assessed to ensure and achieve high quality. These seven main subscales where the 43 standards are organised, stated by Neitzel, *et al*. (2019) are known as scope and furniture accessories, personal care routines, language and reasoning, activities, interactions, formation of practice, and parents and staff.

In 2015, in compliance with Hestenes, *et al.* (2019), a third version of ECERS, ECERS–3 was introduced. According to Harms, Clifford, and Cryer (2014) and Early, *et al.* (2018), the ECERS–3 measures quality in early years provision where children are aged 3 - 5. Furthermore, Early, *et al*. (2018) claims the process of ECERS- 3 corresponds with ECERS–R. This recent edition pays attention and evaluates the quality of the early year's physical areas similarly to the ECERS – R (Setodji, Schaack, and Le, 2017), but it also concentrates on the process of how children’s learning and development are facilitated (Early, *et al.* 2018). According to

setodji, Schaack and Le (2017) is known to be one of the disadvantages described for the ECERS – R, where this form of ECERS, ECERS –R does not focus on the teaching and staff behaviours.

In contrast with ECERS – R tool according to Early, *et al*. (2018) the ECERS – 3 has 6 subscales with 32 indictors to quality and does not consider the staff and parent's subscale. In the opinion of Brunsek, *et al* (2017) and Early, *et al* (2018) ECERS – R and ECERS –3 involve observations where assessors assess whether each standards of quality under the seven/ six subdivisions are met and will score a rating between the scoring scales of 1 and 7. Where the scoring of 1 is reflecting poor, 7 is exceptional quality provision, and the scoring of 5 is satisfactory, claims Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) in the REPEY report.

Seplocha (2019), in her book, has suggested that with higher ECERS rating scores it can lead to children acquiring greater success in developing in all areas of learning and development. However, Brunsek, *et al.* (2017) believes that this can only happen from the total scoring, rather than from individual scores of the subdivisions of quality. Brunsek, *et al.* (2017) claims not every aspect of one subscale impacts children's outcomes. For example, in the subscale where children's language and reasoning are assessed, the scoring does not influence children's mathematical outcomes but does with their future language abilities.

Quality Counts

According to Singler (2012), in addition to Environmental Rating Scales, Quality Assurance Schemes are frequently utilised. Maintained by Cwlwm (2016), a quality assurance scheme provides guidance and helps to recognise the areas where improvements are required. To increase quality, the Quality Counts NDNA early years quality assurance scheme is obtainable. NDNA Quality Counts is a tool that enables staff to self- assess the quality within their early year's provisions with the guidance from an adviser and feedback given via an online system (NDNA, no date). In accordance with Wisbech Day Nursery (2020), this scheme is an official certified award tool that is created to recognise early years settings that are ensuring high quality. Quality Counts was initially a paper-based assessment tool, but it was reintroduced in 2010 as an online system (Evans, 2012).

Stated by NDNA (no date), Quality Counts scheme involves staff within early years setting to self-evaluate and reflect on quality provision in 4 areas. These areas

include 1) children's health, safety and wellbeing, 2) play and learning experiences, 3) provision and 4) leadership and management suggests Dean Close Little Trees Nurseries (2022).

According with NDNA, (b) (2024), practitioners can use the Quality Counts Online Audit and Review or the full certification mark assessment tool (NDNA, (C), 2024) to help them reflect and self-evaluate their quality standards in the 4 areas listed above (Evan, 2012). In compliance with NDNA (b), (2024), and NDNA (c), (2024), both processes will take up to one year to complete. NDNA (2019) claims that when the Quality Counts full certification mark tool is chosen, an experienced advisor will be able to come out to guide and provides practitioners with advice during the completion and process of assessing their quality standards within their provision.

In comparison with ECERS, the Quality Counts quality assurance scheme helps practitioners to identify the areas of where improvements are needed (NDNA, no date).

In contrast to ECERS, according with NDNA (2024) Quality Counts quality assurance tool is used to measure the quality standards and is awarded with an accreditation certificate once the content of the process has been met, completed and achieved. Furthermore, according with NDNA (2024), Quality Counts quality assurance scheme helps to support practitioners within early years settings to build positive relationships, work and communicate better with each other. As in accordance with Evans (2012) the completion of this assessment involves a team effort. Also, Dunning (2020) suggests all practitioners are required to be involved throughout the 12-month completion period. Moreover, in compliance with NDNA (2024) this quality assurance tool can assist practitioners in preparations ahead of an inspection, as well as help with increasing the possibilities of obtaining better results from that inspection (NDNA, no date; Evans, 2012). Using Quality Counts can also help to boost the business aspect of an early year's provision, suggests Evans (2012). It can help attract new employees and ensure other stakeholders, like children's parents are content (Evans, 2012).

Conclusion

To conclude, while both approaches of measuring quality described above, differ greatly, they are useful to utilise as they both are children centred.

By measuring quality within an early year setting with NDNA's Quality Counts assurance scheme, high quality is ensured. As, once the process of this assessment has been completed an accreditation certificate is awarded. Which in accordance with NDNA UK (2019) is physical evidence that can be presented to show and assure children's parents and other stakeholders that standards of quality in provision are considered. It shows children's parent that their children are receiving the best care possible, and their needs are met (NDNA UK, b 2019). Also, to show that the approaches of measuring quality are utilised to increase high quality (NDNA, 2024).

One staff member at a nursery in Lymm noted that by using the NDNA Quality Counts assurance scheme to improve their quality provision and being accredited a certification mark, has enabled their staff strengths to come into light and their abilities to be physically recognised (Dunning, 2020).

Lastly, both the advantages of ECERS and Quality Counts have been highlighted. However, the limitations of Quality Counts scheme have not been explored in this reflective paper as there are inadequate and dated research available that are inaccessible.

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