

The quality of early years education and care matters. According to Mathers, Singler and Karemaker, (2010) high quality early years provision has been shown through research to have a significant impact on positive children's outcomes. High quality provision is effective for children from disadvantaged backgrounds by promoting positive cognitive, social, and behavioural outcomes and reduces the effects of social disadvantages. (Sylvia, *et al.* 2004). Practitioners' qualifications and experience influence quality as there is effective pedagogy with experienced qualified staff. This was found in findings from the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) Study (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) where settings with the highest scores on quality were those with staff with the highest qualifications.

Quality is an inviting environment which stimulates children's, interests, and curiosity. The Environment plays a key role in children's learning and development. (Early Years Matters, 2007). Furthermore, Litjens and Taguma, (2015) state there has been strong evidence that the environment and high-quality pedagogy is promoted by high qualified staff. Adults are co constructors of knowledge and there to scaffold a child's learning. It is also important that staff have quality interactions with children to support their development. Siraj-Blatchford, (2009) Quality interactions have an influence on all areas of development but its particularly important for children's language and communication skills. One quality programme to support this is Learning Language and Loving it. The Hanen Programme (2016). Quality settings have also shown to have effective adult and child interactions and opportunities for Sustained shared thinking with evidence showing these children making the most progress. (Sylvia *et al.*, 2010).

Other structural aspects of quality include child ratios and low staff turnover which are equally as important and have been associated with better quality and outcomes for children. Many of these requirements are stated in the National Minimum standards which are all set out to provide quality care for children. (Welsh Government, 2016). These standards ensure early years settings thrive to have quality assurance measured in places and a duty to monitor and maintain them. These include policies, risk assessments, safety procedures, and training requirements all of which have an impact on children and the care they are provided with. Some of the training is a mandatory requirement, but quality is supported when further training is taken. Ongoing training not only enhances a practitioner's knowledge it ensures

keeping up to date with research and changes. (Kelly, 2017) Continued Professional Development improves performance and quality by increasing knowledge and understanding. (Care Council for Wales, 2016). Quality is measured through parent and staff feedback, inspections as well as observing the children's engagement, happiness and development through observations, snap shots, and photographs.

There are tools which have been developed after research of measuring quality within the early years. One of these being the Infant Toddler Rating Scale. (Harma *et al.* 2017) The Iters scales were designed to evaluate the quality of provision and using the environment scales can transform practice. They can be used by practitioners to reflect practice and implement change. (Nursery World, 2012) Reflective practice is needed in the early years to provide the best care for the children. It is an effective way to maintain and continually improve quality.(Pacey, 2016). Iters are used in flying start setting to measure the environment and social interactions with children and staff. It develops a consistent conception of what high quality looks like and has a shared language for describing it.

The scale has a range of indicators with which to evaluate the early years environment. The indicators stack up like building blocks to find both strengths and weaknesses in provision, identifying areas for improvement. Environment Rating Scales Institute (no date). Covering seven areas of quality which have all been shown through research to impact children's development and outcomes. Iters is a good quality assessment to use as a reflective tool but not as a tick list. The tool identifies areas that are scoring low and have room for improvement. One positive it that it highlights areas needed for improvement and can be a great way for settings to prioritise budgets for training. This can show a need for staff training to improve quality in that area or in Flying start settings if many settings score consistently low in the same areas they will look for funding to provide training on a bigger scale and make the case for ongoing investment in the early years. One disadvantage of Iters that it only shows a snapshot of the setting. You are scored on one day which could have many differences due to staffing, ratios of children on that day also not every activity is planned for in one session and changes to keep the children engaged and interested. To show a true reflection and consistency it would require the scale to be completed several times over different sessions to show the bigger picture of the quality of the setting and the interactions and experiences the children have. To complete to scales training is needed and it requires three hours to complete the assessment. Flying Start annexe quality and childcare refers to the EPPE study and is the basis for the quality childcare provision and high qualifies staff (Welsh

Government, 2017). Although there are four levels from adequate to excellent what one person sees as adequate is often different to another. Nursery World, (2012) reported that some observers found it to be more effective than inspections. The Scale have been said to be transparent and has a scoring system which makes it possible to track improvement. It measures the quality of staff to child ratio, the environment as well as interactions and experiences which are vital factors for high quality early years provision. Biscegli, *et al.* (2009). Iters shows to be a useful tool to reflect on practice. Reflection is an important tool in the early years to reflect on practice to improve and develop. (Gunning, 2022).

Another Scale used to measure quality is Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEW). Developed after the Repey project (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) It highlighted the importance of quality interactions between children and practitioners. The quality of adult and child interactions is vital in the early years. (Howard, *et al.* 2018). It can drive quality above the minimum standards. There are effective pedagogy adults are co-constructors of knowledge. Vygotsky showed us the importance of adult and child in co-construction of knowledge along with Froebel believing the adult is the guide on the side and allowing children freedom to learn but to offer support when necessary (Dourish, 2022) and (McNair, 2021). Sustained shared thinking is when 2 or more individuals work together, the adult and child developing a skill together. The adult's role is to support learning and development. Gealy *et al.*, (2020) tells us of the importance of these interactions to support children's problem solving, curiosity, concept development and high order thinking.

There are five subscales all focusing on socio emotional wellbeing of children. Building trust, confidence, independence. Social emotional wellbeing, supporting and extending language and communication. Supporting learning and critical thinking and lastly assessing learning and language. (Siraj *et al.*, 2015). Social emotional skills are vital for children to learn and have positive outcomes. It allows them to develop confidence communication, social skills, manage emotions and self-regulatory skills all which are needed for lifelong outcomes. (Unicef, 2020). Unlike Iters that is more interested in the environment the SSTEW scale acknowledges the importance of high-quality interactions and the role of the adult. The SSTEW scale focuses on children's emotional wellbeing and positive relationships. The SSTEW scale builds on Iters and focuses on pedagogy in setting (Hoare, no date). Practitioners are required to observe children, interacting with them to support sustained shared thinking. Sustained shared thinking has been found in the most effective settings and requires practitioners to be understand children's interests and development which takes time to gain this knowledge and

does not happen immediately. Howard, et al. (2018) states that for settings to score highly on the scale staff need to interact and know individual children well. The term ‘Sustained Shared Thinking’ comes from Repey research in 2002 and was then used by Kathy Sylva et al as a measure of quality in (EPPE) research in 2004.

SSStew has some disadvantages. It requires a practitioner who is skilled in assessing, monitoring, and supporting children’s socio emotional, linguistic cognitive development. Not all staff within in the early years have had training which can show inconsistencies, training can be costly and not available to everyone due to lack of funding. It would be more successful if all staff have received the training. Waters and Macdonald, (2020) in exploring the use of the scale confirm this and state that professional learning develops not just professional practice but also the experiences of the children they work with. The scores represent an overall judgement of staff behaviours and response to interactions and not individual to a practitioner so may not show a true reflection of a great practitioner. The quality of adult and child interaction matters and needs a balance of clarifying concepts, extending narrative, modelling to children, and asking open ended questions. (Pascal and Bertram, 2018). Time and ratios can play a huge barrier for practitioners having the opportunities to do this. Practitioners are required to pause when asking questions to allow children time to process information and think out loud to encourage children to talk about thoughts and feelings. Some practitioners may not be confident in doing this however Siraj-Blatchford, (2002) found that developing practitioners’ confidence and perception of children’s abilities could lead to better outcomes so it is needed.

To conclude both Scales implement important factors for practitioners to consider for children’s development and outcomes. Both have a scale inadequate to excellent. They provide the early years with clear guidance in all areas of provision which research has shown vital for children in the early years. The Stew scale has great strengths but has some weaknesses in terms of how it measures quality. The iters scale has clear guidelines for practitioners to set out the environment which will best support children and positive outcomes. If both scales were used together, it would be beneficial and provide a more holistic approach. Quality is a stimulating environment which stimulates children’s interests and curiosity. Children who experience this and high levels of involvement and interaction will achieve enhanced learning outcomes. Definition of high quality is an inclusive environment that offers provision of the highest quality possible for children and their families. It is a safe environment whilst promoting the physical, social emotional and

cognitive development of all children. Quality celebrates all cultures and backgrounds of children in the setting. Staff complete continuous training to keep the high quality. Quality scales help ensure this happens.

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