

This paper will critically reflect on the benefits of additional methods used for promotion of quality above statutory requirements and critically analyse methods of quality assurance used in a early years setting.

What is quality?

Welsh Government (2013), describe quality provision in the Early Years as essential and necessary, and for improvements, the focus looks at four key areas, the experience of the child, the environment, leadership and workforce. Research suggests that children attending high-quality early education or childcare settings supports their development such as communication, language and cognitive development, furthermore the quality of care given in the Early Years ensure that children have the best start possible in their early lives. Bland (No date) states children's earliest years are the most important, it builds a foundation for children to gain valuable experiences.

However, it is recognised the nursery school sector has been severely impacted by local authority budget cuts and by central government changes to Early Years. The lack of funding will be detrimental to all young children with the threat of closure becoming more evident in the current climate. There is also a major decline in the number of maintained nurseries in England over the past four decades (Rudoe 2020).

It is suggested, quality involves the whole setting, it is described as a continuous process, examining issues surrounding quality improvement, therefore it is important that practitioners frequently use reflective practice in the setting to identify change. Quality in the Early Years has been linked, through studies, with practitioners having high qualifications and therefore is identified as one of the main professions that use reflective and evaluation practice, resulting in new ways of thinking and delivering strategies, making significant differences in everyday practice. However, a majority of settings place importance on targets, policies, and expectations and there is fear that some practitioners will only work to a specific level, not thinking of going above and beyond. Another essential point to add, quality in the Early Years is sometimes seen as an individual concept, this can be based on a practitioner's knowledge and

experience, personal pedagogy, and training. Therefore, there is a regulation of effective systems and inspections in place to support providers and parents to have access to vital information regarding provision and quality standards (Welsh Government 2013, Reed, M and Canning, N.2012, Bland, F No date and Rudoe 2020).

Subsequently, Moss (2016) identifies a growing problem with quality, the understanding of quality and how to deliver it. He states quality is described as a choice and not a necessity and in the Early Years it is defined as a constructed concept based on values and beliefs of an individual, therefore making it different for each practitioner. Quality is taken for granted, rather than being a language of evaluation and an objective reality. Furthermore, the UK Government (2003) emphasis and link quality with early education and care provision, staffing, training, management and leadership and working together.

Furthermore, Siraj-Blatchford, I *et al.* (2004) The EPPE Project - Effective Provision of Preschool Education, (Sylva *et al.*, 2004) which was a longitudinal study to measure the development of children between the ages of three to seven, identified quality as warm interactions and good relationships with practitioners and highly trained teachers and management. Thus, quality witnessed in Early Years settings has an impact on children's behavioural and social development. It was suggested that investing in superior quality, pre-school provision can result in children achieving targets and for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, breaking the cycle.

The National Minimum Standards (NMS), Welsh Government (2016), is a legislative framework and apply to day care providers and child minders who work with children up to the age of twelve. The standards of registered providers ensure the safety of the environment when looking after young children. They are designed to support and assist settings under important regulations and are relevant to the provision delivered. Standard 18 of the NMS require early years setting to have effective quality assurance and monitoring systems in place. This is to ensure all children attending the setting are having their needs met and the parents are included in this process for the success of the service to be measured. Additionally, the quality of service is continuously monitored to meet the requirements of Standard 16 – quality

and care and advice and recommendations from CISSW or other professional bodies.

Quality Assurance is an essential tool to inform parents and carers the settings their children attend aspire to provide the highest quality, above and beyond the NMS, thus making parents and families feel comfortable their children are learning and the best provision is offered. For that reason, every childcare setting should review quality of provision and practice offered through reflection for progress and evaluate their service and plan for improvement. In the same way, quality assurance is to show evidence of high quality, thus practitioners reflecting to create and improve provision, resulting in children experiencing better future learning and increased life chances (Early Years Wales 2016 and Foundation Years No date).

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWS) is described as a framework observational tool, used to assess professional practice in Early Years Education and Care settings, and practitioners are encouraged to use the tool to support the development of practiced provision, problem solving and imagination to improve the development in young children. There have been several scales used in the Early Years over time, with the focus on space, environment and resources, however SSTEWS focus the scale on development of wellbeing, self-regulation and essentially the interactions and relationships between practitioners and children that demonstrate emotional interactions and focused thinking (Siraj *et al* 2015). . Additionally, Tayler, C. (2015) identify high quality teacher-child relationships and interactions add to the progression and development of young children.

The SSTEWS includes five sub-scales and indicators for practitioners to use as guidance in their practice. The first two sub-scales measure children's confidence and independence, building on trust between adult and child interactions, and social and emotional wellbeing. The indicators support the assessment of quality of provision for children's autonomy and socio-emotional development, allowing practitioners to focus on daily practice that support the development of trust and how children manage distress or conflict. Complementary to this, it is essential to recognise practitioners do not wait for a child to become dysregulated, but to ensure children are highly engaged in the environment with interesting, exciting activities readily available and positive interactions are displayed.

The remainder three sub-scale focus on support children's language and extending their vocabulary, support their learning and critical thinking, and assess their learning and language. Thus, development of decision-making skills, emotional regulation and setting goals children can achieve. Although the scales may seem different there is evidence of a golden thread throughout, and activities are recognised not only to support the development of one area (Hoare, No date).

Practitioners use the indicators to measure the quality of provision delivered and focus on the practice to build a trusting relationship with children and observe how children manage dysregulation when feeling fear or distress. However, an important skill for practitioners is not to be reactive but proactive in their practice, ensuring experiences gained for all children in the environment encourage collaboration in imaginative play and interactions, activities are engaging, and using strategies to support children to problem-solve and self-regulate. Reflective practice is important for practitioners to use as the indicators give guidance and sustained shared thinking is having the capacity to work closely with others, to achieve the goal, resulting in the progression and development of emotional regulation, thus achievement in goals is significantly higher. However, for practitioners who have followed similar frameworks relating to high quality practice, SSTEWS is described as easy to use and follow as there are similarities of content and format but for this to be implemented into an Early Years setting formal training is required which can be costly. Furthermore, the success of SSTEWS is the positive relationships created and developed between the child and practitioner, understanding the child's needs, their behaviours, likes and dis-likes and having knowledge of the child's current development (Kingston and Siraj 2015 and Siraj *et al* 2015).

Early Childhood Environment Ratings (ECERS) is described as a structural approach to assess the quality of learning environments in early childcare settings. It was developed in America and is used globally as an observational tool to measure quality in settings (La Paro, K.M. *et al* 2012). ECERS is designed to be used for small groups of children, and support children's development using a profile for social and cognitive learning environments. There includes a set of target scales within seven categories, using a profile for social and cognitive learning environments. The categories focus on space and furnishings, routines of personal care, language reasoning, provision of bespoke activities, interactions between

children and importantly the adult child interactions, the structure of the programme and finally parents and staff. For the success of the ECERS, it is recognised practitioners need good knowledge and understanding of observation and interpretation skills, and are able to understand the complex and specific descriptions used in the programme. Importantly, to achieve the best possible outcomes in Early Years settings, it is recommended ECERS is used by more than one practitioner and a three hour window to record observations is advised (Sylva, Siraj and Taggart 2003 and Harms, Clifford and Cryer 2005).

The Department for Education (2021) completed a Study of Early Education and Development (SEED), and findings of early years settings demonstrating high quality and using ECERS found children to have better outcomes. Furthermore, the quality of childcare and pedagogy practices in those settings were more effective using ECERS than that of other settings that lacked consistency with the programme not evident and delivered correctly. On the other hand, Gordon *et al* (2013) found the day-to-day practices lack key information and states the findings of ECERS measured did not find a single global aspect of quality, and the scores and factors were rarely linked with outcomes for the child. Furthermore, for ECERS to be effective, time is an important factor as it states observations should be three hours or more by a group of practitioners, thus childcare settings are limited in terms of availability and hours they are open.

In conclusion, preschool can support a positive long-term impact on children's attainment and their social and emotional development, especially children from disadvantaged areas, gained from accessing high-quality preschool. It is recognised preschool can reduce the risk of anti-social behaviours later on in life and for young children living in a less stimulating environment at home benefitted greatly (Department of Education 2021).

Reed and Cannon (2012) recognise reflective practice as an essential skill, as there is such a high expectation on Early Years staff to improve the quality of experiences for young children and how to implement strategies that lead to quality improvement. Reflection and evaluation in the Early Years lead to opportunities of additional training, study and further qualifications, this can lead to further development of practice and new ways of thinking and delivering strategies for change. However,

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this skill is personal, and to be effective, practitioners must have a self-awareness and deeper understanding of oneself, being self-critical and apply change to make significant differences in everyday practice. Furthermore, Bland, (No date), states the importance to work as a team, share good practice and share each individuals vision of what quality should look like in their setting. Bell *et al* 2002 recognises the importance of children's learning and development when they are motivated and involved in high quality activities.

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