What is quality assurance in Early Years?

Quality assurance is the process of observing early years settings to assess and or evaluate whether the quality is being delivered to the learners through various learning experiences, Raikes et al., (2019). The American Society for Quality (2014) defines quality assurance as *"the planned and systematic activities implemented in a quality system so that quality requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled*." However, these quality systems are undertaken by governments. For the system to work, it must be inspected by the government to ensure that the quality of the Early Years programs is meeting the first set of standards set out, Care Inspectorate Wales (2021) and National Minimum Standards, Welsh Government (2016). Although, quality in early years does not actually have a general definition. Furthermore, some common features of quality can be thought of in two dimensions, process quality and structural quality this is supported by Central South Consortium (2021).
Welsh Government (2016) states that learners and parents benefit from having a quality service that is effective and it is important that it is monitored carefully. The registered or person responsible for maintaining and enforcing these standards must ensure that there is effective quality assurance and systems in place related to quality. However, Kingston et al., (2015) implies that the views of the learners and parents are sought as part of this process and to also measure the development and success of the provision in meeting the learner needs. Although, Care Inspectorate Wales (2021), says that continuous monitoring of the quality of service and provision provides the learners and parents with a foundation of trust and bonds between practitioners, families, and communities. The quality of provision should be inclusivity and should be a key feature on delivering quality, Foundation Years (No date).

According to Robb (2022) practitioners in early years settings can see the impact that when reducing stimulation or exclusion within various activities, this could have an impact on the quality of service. However, Department for Education (2021) states that by helping to deliver possible accessibility this can give the learners access to the provision that is needed for the learners which can be monitored on daily basis. Moreover, the engagement on how it gives the learners to respond is that there may be times when language can be a barrier and the needs of learners needs to be improved via different methods of assessment, Standards and Testing Agency (2020), Welsh Government, (2022a). For instance, a family home where English is not the first language and there are additional learning needs learner's, this can be a barrier which can reflect differently and not always support the learner and families, Welsh Government, (2022c). Furthermore, Kambouri (2021) highlights that partnership working, is another key factor in the health and parental participation area in delivering a quality service in early years. Finally, Welsh

Government, (2015) implies that the family's response is usually the outcome of most learners. Following the revisited early years framework, it gives justification and allowance to parents and to work in partnership with practitioners supporting the learners in all early year's settings. On the other hand, Ofsted (2015) does state that it does not have a preferred style or approach to teaching or play within early years. Likewise, all practitioners working in schools and settings, rather than inspectors, are in a better position and placed to make the important decisions about how the learners will learn. Thus, Ofsted (2015) defines the elements of early years practice, and that make up teaching so that there is a common ground and degree of transparency when making judgements about the quality of teaching being delivered.

Methods of Quality Assurance

According to Pivot International (2019) having different methods of quality assurance helps maintain high standards of quality and the service it can provide. Quality control allows the practitioners to support the learners in various areas of development when needed, Department for Education, (2021). According to, European Commission (2018) quality control allows high standards, and the contents gives beneficial needs the learners. However, Early Years Careers (2015) states that by having and incorporating both quality assurance and quality control into the early years quality assurance system within the settings can help to maintain a high level of trust and assurance between practitioners and parents and the long-term success of the setting.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEW)

In non-maintained settings the quality assurance is measured by using SSTEW, Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being assessment. According to Kingston et al., (2015) a Professor of Educational Psychology, in Oxford University, SSTEW is a universal tool that measures and assesses the practice within centre-based early years educational settings. However, Welsh Government (2019a), Welsh Government (2022b). The tool has been modified and additional elements have been added to benefit the setting and get the best curricular provision it can deliver. As demonstrated by Howard et al. (2018) he signifies the meaning of Sustained Shared Thinking is to enhance effective progression of a learner's language and other skills though early years.

The scale is a quality assessment and ensures that the focus and procedures that are in place are meeting the National Minimum Standards, Welsh Government (2016b), Welsh Government (2019c). The assessment entails' various sections and concentrations on Social and emotional development and Cognitive development. These areas are broken down into several categories

such as building trust, well-being, language and communication, critical thinking in supporting learners and how it is assessed and planned, this is supported by Welsh Government (2021a).

However, all sub-scales within the assessment template are broken down into 5 sections and graded with indicators with sections with standards that are to be met and a scale of 1 to 7. Thus, giving the setting an exact pin key points on where measures or areas need addressing accordingly. Moreover, Flying Start (2017) supports the fact that, the first two sub-scales do not assume that practitioners within the setting will wait or delay to act when needed. Despite this, Mohammed (2015) implies that the assessor using this assessment tool through SSTEW will recognise that practitioners and other early years professionals will keep learners optimistically engaged in interesting activities and other interactions across the setting.

The nature of the SSTEW scale assessment is that it supports Sustained Shared Thinking through the adult by cautiously observing to what the learner is doing. The observation will include body language, interacting with the learner and how it is portrayed through teaching styles, this is citied in (Melhuish *et al*. 2015, p.27). Practitioners should demonstrate keen interest and give attention to the learner when needed, respecting the learner's choices and then encourage the learner to elaborate over a period, with possible open-ended questions, this is supported by Solly (2015), Welsh Government (2015), Welsh Government (2022b). The SSTEW scale focuses on the emotional well-being of learners, promoting positive relationships and supporting within communication skills through the SSTEW assessment. The Social Service and well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014c), implies that well-being is paramount in every aspect, within the setting and through the learner's development. The significance of well-being is also a key area within Care Inspectors Wales's Quality of Care Review (Estyn, 2019). Additionally, Lewis (2016) suppors the holistic well-being of learner and states that it is fundamental for healthy development and academic outcomes during the learners earlier educational framework.

The subscales within the assessment can be linked directly into the Foundation Phase Framework (Welsh Government, 2015) especially in the social and well-being development area of learning, which links well with the language, literacy, and communication skills. The Department for Education (2017) implies that that the scales assessment measures successfully work, and it is effective throughout and clear evidence, demonstrating and supporting the educational targets and securing quality provision towards outcomes within settings. The five subscales also emphasise the seven core aims of Implementing Children's Rights in Wales (Welsh Government, 2019b) that are amalgamated throughout the early years, Welsh Government (2015). For example, the SSTEW scale is a quality assurance tool, which is used to enhance the quality of early childhood

education and care. Thus, allowing learners the best start in life and support for future growth and future development in education Welsh Government (2016a).

Welsh Government (2015b) has core aims which allows the learners to be heard and treated with respect, UNICEF (No date). Another essential point is that the scale is an effective use of sustained shared thinking and the core aims highlighted, would allow those learners to have access to a wide range of learning opportunities and not be underprivileged by poverty or a lack of awareness (Welsh Government, 2015, 2019a, 2019b). Parliament (2019) suggests that high quality early years provision within settings can be reduced by socio-economic discriminations and giving support to parents and other professionals from various backgrounds and cultures. Similarly, Education Policy Institute (2018) illustrates that high quality provisions within early year settings can similarly support and therefore bond or unite learners from those poorer areas. Thus, the SSTEW scale can be used to foster developments and increase 'quality' within settings, Welsh Government (2020).

Maintained Settings –Schools, Special Schools, Day Nurseries and Pre-Schools.

According to Child Law Advice (no date), The term *"maintained"* defines a school or setting by reference to show how it is controlled. For example, most commonly throughout the country, a school maintained would be controlled by the local authority. In comparison, Department for Education (2015) The term *"mainstream"* defines a school or setting that would not by who controls it but by how it delivers the provision and most of the time the provision would come under special funded schools and hospital schools, which are examined in more detail.

Schools and other educational centres, all have various descriptors, for example infants, junior, primary, and secondary. According to Welsh Government (2015), (2022b), (2022c) it is to determine whether which parts of SEN and disability law apply to a particular setting, it would need to have detailed programs and it would come under a different category. The basic provisions would usually be controlled by the local authority and then would be referred to as a maintained setting. However, Welsh Government (2014b) states that there are other settings, such as private schools that would come under the same curriculum and local authority but would be contracted between different parties to control, manage and to fund.

According to Welsh Government (2018) Most schools in areas across Wales and the United Kingdom are funded controlled schools by the local authority. Likewise, Welsh Government (2014a) states that the school will have a Headteacher and Deputy Headteacher who would run the school by govern guidelines provided by the local authority and overseen my governors in

accordis to The School Councils (Wales) Regulations (2005). Monthly meetings to discuss the running of the school, how the funds are being spent, well-being of all learners and how the leadership and management within the school are doing this. When the school has notification that an inspection or assessment of the school is due on such a date, provisions that are currently in place will be challenged and advised, this is supported by Pacey (2022).

Estyn (2019) sets out guidance for inspectors and all schools have a copy of the Estyn's Guidance handbook for the Inspection of Primary Schools, Estyn (2019). The inspection preparations for primary schools, proposals towards the guidance for inspectors on making inspection decisions. The inspection will underline the important concerns in relation to standards, quality of education and training. This is reflection of Care Inspectors Wales (2021). There will also be a follow-up activity within the school to support enhancement and development within certain areas of concern.

Legally school inspections are governed by the Education Act 2005. Section 28 of the Education Act (2005) states that '*the inspectors must report the educational standards achieved, quality of education provided, how far the education meets the needs of the learners, quality of leadership and management, spiritual, moral and contribution of the school to the wellbeing of learners.*

The report consists of five sections and all sections have numerous standards where over all the school must achieve during the visit. However, Ofsted (2015) says that the visit can take of three days and depending on what the inspector chooses to follow up first. Prior to the visit, with notification to the headteacher, Estyn (2019) will seek documents such as the school's profit and loss reports, School improvement plan and Self Evaluation Report. All will be covered by the Data Protection Act (2018), although the Self Evaluation report and School Improvement Plan is public documents according to Welsh Government (2021b).

Although Ofsted (2015), Pacey (2022) implies that the purpose of the visit and inspection is to measure the quality of education. Likewise, to track and monitor the wellbeing of the learners, leadership, and management. The school will have very little time to adjust the methods that is currently being used, which will cover all give a more accurate result to the report. The quality of teaching will be the key focus of the visit. Quality in schools will vary from school to school. As teaching staff all have different methods of teaching and different styles, (Welsh Government 2014b), (Welsh Government (2019a). Headteacher usually do an observation once a every term, to ensure that the provision stated the school follows and that the quality of the assessments, teaching methods are right for the learners and learners with ALN, if it is beneficial and SMAART.

SMAART is a realistic method of assessment and will measure, Specific (to the learner's needs and following the Curriculum for Wales), Measurable (observable), Achievable, Ambitious, Realistic and Time measurable, this is supported by Hart (2014), Pacey (2022), Welsh Government (2016b), Welsh Government (2019b).

Nutbrown (2012) suggests that practitioners with higher qualifications deal will monitor the learner's progress and well-being and it will improve the quality of schools. However, Lightfoot (2015) implies that practitioners have the ultimate impact on learning and developmental outcomes for learners. Likewise, Standard 13.4 (Welsh Government, 2016b) implies that all practitioners working within the setting should have suitable qualifications and experience, and at least have 80% of the practitioners holding a level two or above qualification. Nevertheless, Nutbrown (2012) debates that experienced high qualified practitioners are the key to high quality provision. Nutbrown also states that practitioners should be qualified to at least level three to deliver quality provisions setup within the settings. Furthermore, Nutbrown (2012) believes that a change in the current requirements is needed across the educational system. Practitioners with qualifications that do not best fit the role, need to be encouraged, to continue enhance the learners and the high-quality provision.

Conclusion

Both methods of quality are just as important, regardless of whether it is non-maintained or maintained setting. Both have aspects that all meet the Care Inspectors Wales guidelines to meet the needs of the level of 'quality' service and education all learners should receive in their setting. I believe quality assurance is a vital and key focus for all settings, regardless of whether it is in a school, nursery, supermarket or a multi-million-pound business. The level of quality assurance gives the people that use the service, a better understanding and it shows a level of trust and reliance.

Quality assurance for myself, shows my passion and belief when working with early years or young people in Key Stage 2. The quality of service that I use, and deliver is the best of my ability and building trust and bonding with parents. I qualified only 4 years in a training centre, and I knew that I wanted to teach and deliver quality education to young learner. I wanted to make a different to children's lives' and make things more believable and exciting. I learned what 'quality' was when I finally started in a maintained school. I was out with a teacher that has been, teaching primary education for over 30 years. This teacher had high quality delivery and high-quality knowledge of the world we live in. This teacher was the schools lead on 'English and Music'. The was shocked

at the level and quality of standard that was expected of the learners in Key Stage 2. Both grammar, punctuation that is delivered and still is sustained today is at a high quality.

Through this course and module, I have learned so much. I have become more confident and knowledgeable of the Early Years programme, the sustained information that changes annually, the polices that it follows and the in-depth training and passion that all practitioners follow to give a high-quality provision to young learners. I have gained many qualifications over the past 4 years that all have helped and supported myself through my progression and promotions within the school. This degree is far has opened may doors that has helped me deliver quality education and to also support other practitioners in my school to give them that ‘you can do it’. I have embraced my knowledge on others and in return it has built amazing staff abilities and confidence to more forward and to ‘challenge yourself’.

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