

The rights of children in Wales are of maximum importance to the Welsh Government, using the fundamental foundations of the UNCRC, The Welsh Government continue to develop policy for the care and education of children in Wales. (Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure, 2011). The Care Inspectorate of Wales, (CIW) is the organisation responsible for the control and education of quality-of-care standards, and the procedure to monitor and inform to ensure best practice across the country. (Welsh Government, 2016)

Quality is a difficult thing to pinpoint according to Cottle and Alexander, (2012). The term 'Quality' is defined in the Oxford Dictionary Online, (2023) as "the standard of something". However, it is clear through research that standards are not a universal concept. To explore this, it is useful to look at examples of the term in different contexts.

'Quality of Healthcare', the quality of care a person will expect to receive is unique to their own situation. An example of this, is a person living with continued care and support, affected by a disability or lifelong condition. Whereas someone managing a short-term medical situation requiring care, will undoubtedly have a separate set of expectations. (NHS Providers, no date). When considering 'Quality of life', Ratcliffe, *et al.* (2017). Describes the answers from both young people and old age pensioners when asked how they viewed the phrase 'quality of life' – The results showed a vast difference in where the groups placed importance of certain aspects of life, and how the word 'quality' became a diverse notion.

Finally, 'Quality engagement.' Can the measure for quality when considering children entering a setting be compared? What about the children who use a different first language than English? The expectations must be individual and specific to their personal development and surrounding circumstances. (Castro, D. Espinosa, L & Páez, M. 2011)

This common thread shows that quality must be generally measured and deduced by the stakeholders and service users, using their levels of expected standards to identify how effective or poor a service may be.

However, the variety of stakeholders – Parent's/Carers, Local Authorities, Governments, even the children directly affected by the service or setting, similarly present a diverse variety of stances when considering levels of quality, which can cause challenges when trying to meet and fulfil needs. (Cottle and Alexander, 2012). Sylva, *et al.* (2010). and Wolf, (2021). Are among many to cite the work of Katz (1993). Who identifies the vast differences in levels of quality expected between stakeholders, such as parents and governmental policy developers in the early years. Not only are there differences between stakeholder groups as expected, but there are also high levels of divergent and conflicting opinions within the individual groups (for example parents/carers), who uniquely class certain factors as more essential, and prioritise them over others.

Regardless of these barriers surrounding quality and meeting the needs of stakeholders, Early Years settings and providers are required by law to follow regulated standards that must meet and surpass the 'National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to the age of 12 years. (Welsh Government, 2016).

Although, solely meeting legal requirements and adhering to policy driven qualitative standards does not necessarily allow for quality provision. High quality is found in positive, everyday interactions with well trained, passionate staff, an individual

approach to child led care and education and a genuine response to stakeholder concerns and feedback. (Hayes, *et al.* 2017)

The setting providing care has a responsibility to meet the regulated requirements but also, to satisfy the needs of their stakeholders, they must use quality assurance tools to identify areas of developmental needs required for their personal settings. (Welsh Government, 2016)

This paper highlights some of the benefits of quality assurance in the early years, and critically evaluates two professional development quality assurance tools which reflect the importance of raising and obtaining high standards.

Over the years, there are countless sources of research that suggest children who receive high quality care and education within their earliest years, display greater developmental outcomes in areas such as general education, reading, writing, oracy and numeracy. Along with promoting independence, more enhanced concentration and strengthened individual qualities. (Welsh Government, 2014). Despite this research, there have been noted inconsistencies in providing firm evidence of improvements to language attainment following studies of Early Education and Development, according to short term outcomes within the research of Melhuish and Gardener, (2021). And Hong, S. *et al.* (2019)

Whilst not clearly or precisely indicated through research to date, many believe future results will soon begin to show the impact and evidenced benefits in children, who have access to high quality childcare. (Welsh Government, 2022). Measuring this 'quality' in the early years is done both internally and on an external level. Quality assurance takes the form of Local Authority and Education board Inspections, to identify areas of excellence and areas where revisions need to be made to improve. (CIW, 2023) However, internal audits and evaluations to observe and record progress are critical if settings wish to meet and exceed the national minimum standards set by the Welsh government, Department for Education and UNCRC. (Welsh Government, 2016).

Observation is required by law to assess and inform, providing unique child led support towards development within the early years. (Welsh Government. 2014) However, Bradbury, (2014) expresses concern that while observation is a known critical tool in collecting information in the Early Years, it cannot always be a true, evidenced reflection of learning and development due to its restrictions, thus leading to incorrect data collection.

Agreeing, Macblain and Gray, (2016). Discuss how observation can be misleading and cite the work of Bandura (1997), and Colvered and Hodgkin, (2011) who while recognising the benefits of observation of children, foresee some of the limitations and obstacles. For example, children who model and imitate expected behaviours or the behaviours of their peers through lack of understanding or lack of confidence in their own capabilities. The Department for Education, (2021). State that practitioners must observe children in their care daily and reflect on the observations they make, while considering the additional observations from parents and care givers outside of school, and services related to the children in the wider community, to build a clearer picture of the child's personal developing journey.

In Wales, programmes, observation tools and screening documents are continuing to be developed to aid internal quality assurance in the Early Years. Following the

Covid Pandemic and in the wake of the country's financial crisis, poverty is a significant problem affecting families everywhere. (Bevan foundation, 2020). Focusing on these challenges, Welsh Government (2022) devised a program to support the health and development of children in Wales. The partnership programme links services and communities to realise improved outcomes holistically through structured surveillance.

Another quality assurance method introduced is The Early Years Wales, Childcare Awareness toolkit (Early Years Wales, 2022). '*Quality-For-All*', assisting services and settings to improve their delivered quality through reflection, assessment and review, meeting and exceeding the Welsh Governments policies in place.

Through extensive research into the benefits of assessing and assuring high quality engagement and interaction, the development of Early Years Rating Scales have been created. Siraj, Kingston, & Melhuish, (2015). have collectively created scales to enhance and monitor outcomes of early years provision and identify and improve the use of sustained shared thinking. The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale ((SSTEWS)) was created to build and monitor consistency when assuring quality service is being provided within the formative years, through adult behaviours and exploring the emotional well-being in children. (Hoare, no date). Additionally, the (ECERS) and (ITERS) scales provide a tool to create a pedagogical approach to reflection, and improve the provision sustained by enabling adults and the environment. (Howard, *et al.* 2018)

The (SSTEWS) Scale is built up of 14 elemental processes, then divided into five areas of assessment, developing confidence, well-being, language and communication, critical thinking and assessment of learning. These areas are then rated in a scale from 1-7. 1 being 'Inadequate' and 7 being 'Excellent'. (Howard, *et al.* 2018). (Hoare, no date). and (Siraj, Kingston, & Melhuish, 2015). An example of the scale under the subscale of how supporting critical thinking is measured, is set out in statements which identify the level of attainment the setting has reached. An 'inadequate' statement refers to 'Staff showing little understanding' of a concept in one of the core learning aims set out by the Welsh Government. A midpoint in the scale which lies between minimal and good, would evidence 'Staff encouraging children to make connections' to these concepts, and at the height of the scale at number 7, the 'Staff would model' behaviour in problem solving to encourage the children to actively explore the concepts. (Yr Athrofa, no date). These assessments are completed by highly trained and qualified staff who undergo training and are moderated to provide inter-rater integrity. However, the scale can be used internally for self-evaluation purposes. (Howard, *et al.* 2018). The outcomes of the (SSTEWS) scale assessment inform practitioners and develop techniques in interaction and engagement. Follow up assessments are completed, and a base-line score is given to settings to reflect upon with feedback. (Siraj, Kingston, & Melhuish, 2015). At the end of the (SSTEWS) assessment there is a section devoted to self-reflection progression steps, which highlights areas for professional development, planning and enhanced provision to ensure the stakeholders are happy with the child development outcomes. While the (SSTEWS) Scale is a useful tool to assess staff provision, it comes with some limitations. It must be used alongside other tools to assess the environment etc, as it only looks at the impact of emotional well-being through adult interaction. (Siraj, Kingston, & Melhuish, 2015). Another area of limitations that may affect the outcomes of the (SSTEWS) analyses are highlighted in a research project carried out by Macdonald, Gealy, & Tinney, (2021). Who identify

unavoidable inconsistencies in staffing and the management of early years settings across Wales that will evidently create different outcomes, potentially leading to difficulties in assessing under a universal bracket. Although, in addition to this, Wieduwilt, Lehl, and Anders. (2023). Refer to the evaluation tool as reliable, even though it is advisable to continue to find ways to improve it. (Hoare, no date).

A second tool used in quality assurance in Early Years is the 'Quality Counts' Approach (NDNA, no date). This Framework has been created by the National Day Nursery Association with the foundations developed on the UNCRC and best practice in the Early Years Sector. (NDNA, no date) The Framework aims to identify and improve areas of provision in settings through staff evaluation and reflection. The main purpose of the assurance tool is to encourage every member of the setting, to take part and make improvements consistently across the service, demonstrating and evidencing areas of need and areas of improved outcomes. With access to almost 100 Self-Evaluation templates, Online and in-person audits with feedback and progression steps, and support from the industries professionals, settings can improve upon the quality of service their children and families receive under 4 areas of reflection, 'Play and Learning', 'Health, Safety and Well-being', 'Leadership and Management' and 'Workforce'.

NDNA (no date) promise to raise outcomes for the setting in preparation for their Government led inspection processes, however, this service and certification/accreditation comes at a cost of £1125.00 for a basic package.

Sadly, these types of specialised quality assurance packages and accreditations are expensive and unaffordable for settings in the lowest supported areas, making them inaccessible to those who would benefit greatly from the information they offer. (Brennan, D. and Adamson, E., 2014). (Fenech, M. 2013).

In conclusion, Quality assurance in the Early Years is an integral way to identify areas of excellence, but also areas that need improvement, and set goals to strive towards surpassing the expectations of legislation and service users/stake-holders. (Eisenstadt, 2010). While quality, as discussed in this written work, does not fall under a universal concept, universally politicians, services, parents/carers and children alike expect a certain standard of what is important to them. Reaching and exceeding standards no matter how personal and unique to the circumstances of the setting or stakeholder can only improve the outcomes for better provision and ensure best practice, in turn supporting the development of the children in the setting in line with the four purposes set out by the Welsh Government, (2022)

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