

The word quality can have many different meanings and interpretations. According to Oxford Learner's Dictionary (2022) the word quality is based on how good or bad something is perceived; but when the standard is compared to something new, the original view on it may change. The challenge with defining quality is that every individual may have a different opinion on what high quality actually is. This is also true for the judgement of high quality in the context of early years' schools or settings; parents, teachers, researchers, policymakers, inspectors and children are all stakeholders who will form opinions of the quality of the service that is on offer (NASBM, 2016). There are many different methods that can be used to gather the perspectives of multiple stakeholders in order to secure high quality in an educational setting. How practitioners select and use these tools, may depend on their educational philosophy and what they value. External quality assurance processes offer a more generic approach to all settings but may be more focused on national minimum standards rather than high quality (Welsh Government, 2016). For example, the national minimal standards for childcare settings have standards that are non-negotiable such as facilities available, range of activities and a daily structure or routine but are not necessarily focused on the quality of the provision being offered. However, Care Inspection Wales (2019) does require childcare providers to self-evaluate their own provision through consultation with stakeholders and a focus on offering the best experiences for children and securing high levels of wellbeing.

Clifford et al. (2020) would support the view that ensuring quality in childcare and educational settings is essential to ensuring that all children are able to thrive. Furthermore, allowing the quality to be driven by the children is the most beneficial approach as the provision is based around the children's individual needs and interests. Their view is that quality in a setting is secured by having passionate practitioners, children that experience well-planned enhanced provision and an environment that is continuously exceptional and personal to each individual child. John Dewey's theory also supports this approach, believing that children absorb things most when they are actively engaged in their learning. He also spoke about the importance of developing the curriculum based on children's interests as it would make the learning more relevant to them. He referred to this as 'youth work', where children could take part in informal educational activities. In addition, Dewey saw education as a process of life as opposed to a preparation tool for children's future (Research Gate, 2012).

In contrast, Moss (2016) states that quality is something that everyone wants but perhaps not enough. He believes that quality is viewed as something rare that can only be provided by experts and therefore staff can feel that excellence, is unattainable and their practice is never good enough. There is also the danger that this practice is led and envisioned by one individual, which can lead to a lack of diversity and new ideas. In addition, the paper states that too many opinions could have a negative effect on the quality of the provision and that bringing in a range of stakeholders from academic experts to children, would provide too many perspectives and risk losing sight of what quality is.

Like Moss, Reed et al. (2012) are also coming from a perspective of high quality being something that can be overwhelming for practitioners to secure. However, they focus on the importance of quality improvement as a continuous process rather than just a vision of quality. They promote the importance of reflecting on areas of practice with the end vision of enhancing the support for children's well-being as well as that of their families. This is achieved by seeking the views of all stakeholders who are involved in the school as well as advice and support from external agencies. This could be viewed as a more realistic and attainable approach as opposed to using a 'high quality' approach within an early years setting. The improvements approach strips everything right back and looks into the root of the issues which enables practitioners to secure quality more gradually over time. The method also recognises the importance of including the children into the evaluation, in line with Clifford et al.'s approach. The source outlines some effective approaches to help secure a high-quality setting. These include seeking and take advice from others, being honest, putting theory into practice and ensuring that everything that is being done is with the children's best interests at heart. Creating an ethos which is based on following the children's suggestions and interests helps to secure this approach, although this does require practitioners to value play and trust the children's instincts to lead their own learning. This approach can be complex at the beginning and there may well be training implications for staff. Practitioners need to feel confident to undertake observations of the children across the learning environment in order to see what is making them curious and engaging their interest. They can then use this knowledge to develop the provision accordingly.

In all schools and settings, there is an expectation that certain minimum standards are fulfilled and there are core quality assurance and inspection processes in place to monitor this. The

aspirations for high quality and excellence are more often as a result of schools and settings internal systems for monitoring and reviewing their practice and the impact that they have on outcomes for learners. Schools and settings should respond to stakeholders' expectations over time to show they are responding and listening to them and striving to improve (European Commission, 2018). The benefits of ensuring high quality provision, with a strong focus on the well-being of all learners and staff, are key to ensuring the long-term success and happiness of children. There are many tools for monitoring and evaluating provision in these terms and it is important that these are carefully selected to measure what is important and enables the setting to drive to improvement. On the other hand, Iles (2019) would contradict this, stating that assessing quality is not very reliable due to the number of different factors that make a setting high quality. Though he does recognise the benefits of the national minimum standards putting policies in place to support the early years settings with quality assurance measures. These are known to be effective as they are monitored and maintained regularly. This results in the children and families having a safe and reliable childcare setting.

One method for measuring quality in a school or setting is the Leuven Scale. The Leuven scale is a play-based and child-led observational method for use within an early educational setting. It requires the practitioner to observe children and put them on a scale of 1-5 for their emotional well-being and involvement levels. It is a popular method as it allows early years schools and settings to focus on offering first-hand and child-led provision. Though in recent years, it is now being used by practitioners to evaluate the quality of their setting. The assessment is still carried out as normal, the results are then looked at in more detail to see how involved the children were with a chosen activity. The scale is designed to pick-up levels of involvement, but when this is high it shows the quality must also be high and that deep level learning will be taking place (MacRae et al., 2020).

However, Woods (2016) would argue that the Leuven scale was not only put into place for monitoring children's development and progress, but also for practitioners to be able to monitor the quality of the learning environment. It gives practitioners the opportunity to evaluate their own impact on the quality of the provision. Through their evaluation of the levels of involvement and well-being of the children, practitioners will be able to make judgements on the quality of the environment that has been set up and the impact of their role in the facilitation of learning. Ferre Leavers, who created the Leuven scale, states that children who are in a state

of high levels of involvement are engaged in deep level learning. Therefore, if children were not showing signs of high involvement, the environment would need to be adapted to meet the needs and interests of all individual learners. Leavers wanted this piece of research to be used to inform critical reflection by practitioners.

There are many different models which will enable the assessment of quality in a setting. This might be focused on children, practitioners or the learning environment (Welsh Government, 2013). Each method has a particular focus on different aspects of the environment and practitioners need to give careful consideration to the type of model that will best suit their needs and those of their learners. When making these choices, it is important for practitioners to consider the benefits of using quality assurance tools that focus in depth on particular areas or whether a broader perspective of the whole environment is required. For example, the *ITERS*, the early environment rating scale, looks at the provision in the setting and how well children are engaging with this. However, it could be argued that there is not enough of a focus on the role of the staff in the setting and the impact they are having on children's development and progress. Nonetheless, as with the *Leuven Scale*, it is clear from this model that if the provision for the children is not engaging their interests, then there are implications for how staff have set up and managed the environment (Clifford et al., 2020).

Moreover, Pound (2017) highlights the importance of the Montessori approach with the environment being prioritised as the 3rd teacher. This model promotes the adaptation of the environment to meet the needs of each child, because when a child is interested, they are engaged. However, Montessori's view on the role of practitioners would be in contrast to the requirements of the *ITERS* method. She believed that if the practitioners responded to children's behaviours following their observations, then this would prevent any limitations on the child. Therefore, as important as the environment is, it can only be of high quality when the practitioners are ready to observe learning and refine the environment accordingly.

According to Mackenzie (2016), the sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being scale, also known as *SSTEWS*, is a tool that can be used for both the children and practitioners to assess the quality of their setting. Sustained shared thinking is when two people work together to problem-solve, clarify queries or deepen a conceptual understanding. It is an observational method that requires the adult to listen carefully whilst observing body language and actions

and is mainly used with two to five year olds. Sustained shared thinking is something that children do subconsciously when they are presented with engaging opportunities for enquiry and “desirable difficulty” that develops their problem-solving skills and creative thinking (Independent Thinking, 2017). However, it is the role of the practitioner to take the learning deeper by engaging as a learning partner, asking open-ended questions and suggesting ideas whilst ensuring that the child’s own wonderings and ideas remain at the heart of the experience (Purdon, 2013). An environment where children are encouraged to problem solve independently through real-life situations ensures a strong focus on their linguistic and cognitive development and achieves high quality outcomes. Selecting a quality assurance tool such as SSTEWS would enable practitioners to focus on these elements.

Siraj-Blatchford, et al. (2015) defined sustained shared thinking as an episode where groups of individuals work together to solve a problem or clarify an idea. Although for this approach to work the ideas must come from more than one individual. They introduced the sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being scale as a tool to support and develop focused tasks, problem-solving and the imagination of the children. They explain that there have been many tools and methods to support quality in a setting, but that SSTEWS offered a focus on well-being, self-regulation and promoting focused thinking. There are 14 items within the scale that shows the quality in practice; each item includes text that define the assessment criteria, and these are known as indicators. Children’s progress can be measured over time and provision adapted to be able to meet their needs effectively. Therefore, this scale does offer something additional in comparison to other models. The SSTEWS observation has to be completed in one session; this can be challenging when there is so much going on in the room, although it is done with a group of children at a time. The SSTEWS requires specific training for practitioners which can be time-consuming and costly, but it offers a practical and effective approach to focusing on quality learning once it is put into practice (Birth to Seven Matters, no date).

To conclude, it is evident from the research undertaken that quality assurance processes, whether internal or external, do play an important part in securing high quality provision in schools and settings. Children only have one opportunity to access early years education and, although the national minimum standards are important to secure the health and safety of young children in day care settings, a focus on the quality of their experiences is vital to ensure that they are able to thrive and make the best progress possible. Schools and settings need to give

careful consideration to the type of quality assurance tools they are using and how they are going to utilise the information gained to drive improvements in their environment. Quality assurance methods do not necessarily cover all aspects in a setting which may result in needing to use a variety of methods. It is important that the views of all stakeholders, including learners, are taken on board when self-assessing quality but it is important that these processes do not become over complicated and take away from the focus on the learners. Quality assurance methods which allow a focus on a quality improvement approach would seem to be a more manageable model which allows settings to strive for quality over time while keeping the wellbeing of learners and staff at the heart of their practice. Furthermore, from the quality assurance methods considered, it would seem that a strong focus on learner wellbeing and engagement, secures positive outcomes on a wider spectrum. Therefore, keeping children at the heart of the process would appear to be the most important consideration.

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