

Leadership for Systems of Quality Part 2.

Quality within early years settings extends beyond the statutory requirements and minimum standards, it focuses on the children's experiences, the relationships with the children and families, the environment in which shape the children's development. The Welsh Government (2023) defines high quality childcare as provision that is child-centred, responsive and inclusive. An environment where children feel safe, valued and supported. Sylva et al (2004) supports this by stating quality in early childhood education includes the environment, pedagogy, relationships, leaderships and the outcomes for the children through their play. They describe it as a process and product, the process being the play experiences and learning opportunities the children have access to, and the product being the developmental outcomes of those experiences. High quality provision is widely associated with the development of children's long term educational, social and emotional skills. Research shows children who attend high-quality early years settings show stronger cognitive and social outcomes particularly those from more disadvantaged areas and backgrounds. (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2011).

The importance of quality in early years is supported not only by policies but by research, children's early years (0 to 7 years) are the most critical years for development these years significantly influence future development. The Curriculum for Wales (2022) emphasises that all children have the right to high quality learning experiences that support their holistic development. The National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare 2016 include statutory expectations for the safeguarding of everyone involved, the staffing procedures, the learning environment and the leadership. The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings highlights the importance of enabling environments, responsive planning and child led learning experiences. These frameworks ensure children are accessing settings that provide safety, nurturing environments and adults and provide the resources for ongoing development. Quality is also essential for children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child UNCRC which is embedded in the Welsh Law through the Rights of Children and Young Persons Measure 2011 that state every child has the right to education that allows them to develop their personality, talents and thrive to the best of their abilities. However statutory requirements do not guarantee excellence, quality practice and care is a continuous reflective process. Rodd (2013) argues that compliance alone does not create excellence, it is leadership and management that promotes quality and ensures continuous development. Melhuish et al. (2015) supports this by concluding that quality early years experiences positively impact children's development educational outcomes. Sylva et al. (2004) also supports this as they found that high quality settings improve children's social and cognitive development. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education EPPE study (Sylva et al, 2004) found that high-quality care

and education have a great impact on a child's language, numeracy and social development. This aligns with the Welsh Government priorities of equality and inclusion as outlined in the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act 2018. This act emphasises child-centred practice focusing on wellbeing and child led interactions, it reinforces the need for leadership that is reflective and highlights the importance of early identification which depends on high-quality observation and assessment.

Reflecting on practice it is evident that just meeting statutory requirements alone does not automatically result in high quality provision and experiences for the children. While the regulations and policies ensure safety, they overlook the children's opinions and voices. Frameworks such as the National Minimum Standards provide an essential foundation, it is just the starting point for the quality needed in early years settings. According to Heckman (2006) early childhood is the most effective years for development later in life, as skills developed early on form the foundation for lifelong skills. He states that high quality provision leads to long term benefits such as improved educational outcomes, better rates of employment and reduced crime rates. This is also supported by Campbell et al, (2012) who researched children into adulthood and found the children who experienced positive high quality early education had a higher education achievement, better employment rates and improved health outcomes. Leadership plays a crucial role in ensuring quality care, ensuring continuous improvement, embedding reflective practice and ensuring child centred approaches.

High quality provision is essential for children, and this is supported and proven through thorough research and multiple studies from reputable authors. When multiple authors across decades agree on the same statements and information it strengthens the reliability of the evidence base. Research shows that early childhood is the critical period for brain development, Mclean et al (2023) highlights that early learning environments improve children's outcomes. However, quality is not just about the academic outcomes, quality provision also supports children's emotional wellbeing. From multiple studies, authors, and frameworks it is evident that high-quality care in early years improves children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development, quality matters most for disadvantaged children by helping reduce inequalities and providing all children the same opportunities, strong relationships throughout along with supportive warming environments are the key components to quality-care and leadership promote a major role in enabling the quality in the settings. This is why high-quality provision is essential in early childhood education and not optional.

Statutory Frameworks such as National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare, Care inspectorate Wales (CIW) inspection frameworks and the curriculum for Wales

set the foundation for quality, safeguarding and curriculum expectations. They state the expectations for what must be in place day to day however they do not include how interactions and everyday practice looks like. Therefore using additional tools such as the Sustainable Shared Thinking and Well-being Scale (SSTEWS) and PACEY quality resources help leadership ensure continuous development and improvement that are child-centred and include the children's voices. The SSTEWS Scale is designed to assess while improving the quality given to children and their families/carers. It focuses on certain areas such as social development, self-regulation, emotional wellbeing, language communication and listening, problem solving, sustained shared thinking, and the use of assessment to extend the children's learning. There are many benefits of SSTEWS some of these include the deep focus on adult to child interactions, it focuses on how adults and children think together and solve problems. The Scale can also be used to self-evaluate your own practice which supports the Curriculum for Wales emphasis on reflective practice. The advantages to SSTEWS Scale are it tells us how consistently adults engage in sustained shared thinking with the children in their care, how the children's emotional well-being is supported and how practitioners plan and access to extend learning based on the children's needs. This is supported by research showing sustained shared thinking and high-quality interactions are strongly linked to improved child outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002). However, the disadvantages are it does not give the full background of the setting including the qualifications of the practitioners, the staffing levels and it does not assess the leadership. Another disadvantage is it is limited into family relationships, and wider multi agency working and these are crucial factors for high quality care. Bronfenbrenner (1979) states through his ecological systems theory that a child's development is shaped by interconnected systems with the family forming the most immediate and influential context therefore this highlights the importance of early years settings working in partnership with the families and carers to provide high-quality care.

PACEY is Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years. It provides a range of tools such as self-evaluation frameworks, training, quality schemes and templates. The benefits of PACEY are it is practical and accessible, and they align with statutory frameworks. PACEY tells us how well policies and procedures are embedded into the setting and daily practice, the partnerships with parents/carers and professionals and the extent of reflective practice and self-evaluation with the staff. Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) states settings which actively engage with parents and families and share information about the children's learning were more effective in supporting development. Similarly, Sylva et al (2004) found that parental involvement significantly enhanced children's cognitive and social outcomes demonstrating that quality provision extends beyond the setting and using PACEY to ensure family connections are being made and strong relationships are formed can strongly

enhance the settings quality of care. However, the disadvantages are it does not offer the same in depth observation analysis of interactions between adult and children as the SSTEWS Scale does. It also does not measure the children's emotional well-being as effectively as the SSTEWS Scale.

To compare both, SSTEWS is strongest in terms of providing rich, research base of process quality of interactions, thinking and emotional well-being. However, PACEY provides a better support of organisational quality, professional standards and training. Together they work well as they offer a more holistic view of quality as SSTEWS assesses in the moment with the children and PACEY assesses how the setting is organised and the leadership. Where SSTEWS has its disadvantages, PACEY provides support and where PACEY has its disadvantages SSTEWS provides support. SSTEWS provides strong evidence on children's experiences, interactions and aspects of pedagogy, it partially addresses the environment and routines but is less so on the leadership and management. Whereas PACEY gives strong evidence on leadership, policies and professional practice and some insight into relationships and environment but lacks in detailed evidence of pedagogy. Research consistently shows that leadership is the key to quality provision (Rodd, 2013). Tools like SSTEWS and PACEY help settings ensure the quality of interactions, the emotional well-being is at the forefront of care, the depth children's engagements and strength of leadership and professional practice. This aligns with the Welsh Government expectations that settings should be reflective, child-centred and continuously improving. These tools also support the Curriculum for Wales, emphasis of child-centred pedagogy, responsive interactions, wellbeing and purposeful experiences and learning. SSTEWS Scale directly measures these elements while PACEY supports the settings organisational conditions that make them possible.

In conclusion, this reflection has reinforced the importance of high-quality early childhood provision and the key components to ensuring high-quality care. I have also concluded that it is not solely achieved through statutory policies and framework but through the commitment to be reflective in practice. Tools such as the SSTEWS Scale and PACEY framework offer valuable insights and support for quality care. SSTEWS supports the meaningful interactions with the children, along with their emotional well-being and cognitive development while PACEY supports leadership, partnerships with families. Together they provide leaders a more holistic understanding of what children experience and what systems can help support them. This aligns with the Curriculum for Wales and CIW expectations that settings should be reflective, child-centred and always improving. Effective leaders use these tools not as checklists but to professionally develop and improve provision. Through this reflection I have recognised the importance of using multiple sources to help improve practice and children's experiences.

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