The Importance of High-Quality Provisions within Early Childhood Education

Theorist such as Vygotsky *et al.,* (1978) and Bronfenbrenner (2007), believe that sociocultural and environmental factors can be influential in a child's development. Stating further that the quality of interactions and opportunities can either have a positive or detrimental effect on a child's overall academic and life outcomes. To attain effective child development within Early Childhood Education, it is essential that practitioners understand the importance of providing high-quality provisions (Torii *et al.,* 2017). Within this review, the meaning, aspects, and the importance of quality will be explored. In addition, the Leuven Scale and The Baby Effective Early Learning Program (BEEL) quality assurance modules will be analysed (OECD, 2015.p. 165-200).

Cottle and Alexandre (2012.p. 635-654) discusses that due to the diversity of the stakeholders that are involved within the setting, challenges can arise when discussing the concept of 'Quality'. Subjective to the perspective of the children, parents, practitioners, policy makers and setting leaders (Mathers *et al*., 2012). The perception of 'quality' depends on the implementation of practice, in which a valued judgment can be derived (Moss, 2016). Howard *et al.,* (2018.p. 1017-1030) recognised the aspect of a child's happiness was paramount in parents and carers views in relation to quality provision. However, Barber (2018) established, that policy makers and settings definition of 'quality' differed according to the experience of management and practitioners, and which were focused or influenced by statutory inspection reports (Howard *et al.,* 2018.p. 1017-1030). Although there maybe difficulties in distinguishing a clear definition, it is essential that settings maintain a high level of quality to achieve the National Minimum Standards (NMS) Section 18, the outcomes set out within the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act (2021), Osted Inspection Framework and the UNCRC's rights for the best interests for the child (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2022.; Estyn, 2021.; UNICEF UK, 2024). Addressing quality standards, enables legal requirements set out in the Children Act (1989.; 2004)

To enable setting to achieve a high-quality standard, Sollars (2020.p. 613-630), and Barbar (2018) discuss, that it is essential to acknowledge Bronfenbrenner (2007) and Vygotsky *et al.,* (1978) theories and beliefs on gaining high achievement outcomes.

Practitioners must appreciate, that a quality learning environment, includes more than the physical space available and includes knowledgeable adults, inclusive open-ended play, and challenge opportunities for all children (Rodd, 2021).

Hayes (2024); Huang *et al.,* (2024); and Hayes *et al.,* (2023) explain that to achieve a high-quality setting, reflective practice must be undertaken in accordance with research-based standards. This will enable settings to provide the children, and families they serve with a best practice approach. Expand further the Department for Education (2017) and NDNA (2023), stating that when participating in reflective practice, settings have the ability to assess staff ratios qualifications and training; whether the curriculum provided is age appropriate; and whether the learning environment is positive and safe. By reviewing these aspects, it enables practitioners to provide the children within their care with the support, engaging experiences, and positive warm interactions. When all aspects are addressed, practitioners have the ability to respond to the needs of each individual child and their families (Pianta *et al.*, 2016.p. 119-137).

Siraj-Blatchford (2002) and Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva*.,* (2010.p. 713-730) discuss that for a child to achieve effective and positive outcomes, it is essential that they are provided with quality provisions. Therefore, it is necessary for practitioners to understand that when children are provided with high quality provisions, it yields a profound effect on a child's cognitive, communication and language attainment (Welsh Government, 2014., Foundation Years, 2014). Furthermore, the Welsh Government (2013) document 'Building a Brighter Future', explains that high-quality early years provisions significantly influence a child's future life experiences.

NDNA (2023) and the Foundation Years (2014), consider that high quality provisions and opportunities enable children to achieve not only higher outcomes at school but also develop superior cognitive, emotional, and social abilities. However, when provided with poor provisions, opportunities and support, children lack the necessary learning and development outcomes, required to be become a life-long learner (Manning *et al.,* 2019.p. 370-415*.;* Foundation Years, 2014). NDNA (2023) explain that positive experiences, responsive and stable adult relationships, within an environment which is supportive and safe are crucial in a child's brain development. OECD (2015.p. 165-200) discusses further, that when provided with high quality

care, children not only excel within an academic capacity, but due to their developmental capabilities in reasoning, they show less aggressive behaviour and have the ability to socialise with others. When provided with opportunities within a child-centred environment, children are able to develop their creativity and important life skill needed to lead a happy life (Hayes, 2024).

Due to the increasing awareness and significant emphasise on high quality early years provision, there have been numerous studies performed. These include the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) implemented by Melhuish and Gardiner, (2021); Siraj and Melhuish (2015) Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education Project (EPPSE); and Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva's (2010.p. 713-730) Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY).

Data evidence retrieved from these research project, reinforces the concept that for children to achieve lifelong positive outcomes, they must be provided with quality and effective early years pedagogy (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2021.; Siraj and Melhuish, 2015.; Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2010.p. 713-730). Discuss that when children are provided with a quality learning environment, it enables the child to attain positive and long-term progress and social development (Siraj and Melhuish, 2015). Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, (2010.p. 713-730) explain that to achieve high quality, a setting much provide children with 'sustained shared thinking' opportunities. These enabling environments permit children to explore freely their interests in a safe environment and where provisions are balanced between free play and teacher-initiated activities. This 'sustained shared thinking' environment, make provision for settings to adopt social and behaviour policies, permitting children and practitioners the ability to rationalise situations and conflict Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, (2010.p. 713-730). The SEED report goes further to state that when children are provided with high quality provisions, children from all socio-economic backgrounds are furnished with the necessary tools and experience to attain higher academic and life outcomes (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2021). By providing access to positive interactions and opportunities to explore their own learning and interests, not only influence a child's early years language, reading and mathematics development, but also influences their predicted GCSE results (Department for Education, 2017). Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, (2010.p. 713-730) explain that to achieve high quality, a setting

much provide children with ‘sustained shared thinking’ opportunities (Siraj and Melhuish, 2024).

Crosse (2022) clarifies that, to develop a high standard of quality, practitioners must be encouraged to reflect on their practise, the child’s learning environment and the support given for the child to achieve a deep-level learning experience. For this section of the review, the Leuven Scale, and the Baby Effective Early Learning Program (BEEL) will be discussed further.

Unlike other assessment tools, the Leuven Scale enables practitioners to measure pre-school children’s personal, emotional, and social developmental skills in accordance with the Welsh Curriculum (Welsh Government, 2020). Although there are 4 different Leuven Scale measure that measure a child’s development, within pre-school settings, measurements focusing on the child’s well-being and involvement are most commonly used (Laevers, 1997.; 2000). As an evidence-based approach, the Leuven scale enables practitioners to observe children through play-based activities, to assess both the child’s communication and language development in addition to their emotional development and social interaction (MacRae & Jones, 2020). This form of pedagogical assessment, compel practitioners to adapt and react to the child’s needs, ensuring that the child is placed at the centre of their own learning experience. Laevers (2017), and MacRae & Jones, (2020) state that when a child’s area of interest has been identified, it enables practitioners to pinpoint the best resources needed for the individual child’s engagement. Georgeson & Payler, (2013) discusses this further by stating that when a child achieves high level engagement within an activity, there is a tendency that the child’s level of emotional wellbeing will also be high. When observed, children with a high level of emotional wellbeing, demonstrate confidence and easy within their surroundings, engage with others or discuss the task with themselves and demonstrate expressive and spontaneous actions and movements (Laevers, 1997, 2000.p. 20-29). However, like numerous assessment tools, the Leuven Scale does have its draw backs. Although observational practise still applies to Additional Learning Needs, the observational prescriptive and reductive classifications can be limited or inaccurate. Resulting from, the lack or reduced presents of described behaviours within the scale, especially apparent in children who are non-verbal (MacRae & Jones, 2020.p. 234-246.; Georgeson & Payler, 2013). Furthermore, like

Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 2014. p. 209-217), the Leuven Scale does not take into consideration cultural differences and the different cultural behaviours (Robinson and Jones-Diaz, 2016). MacRae & Jones, (2020.p. 234-246) and Georgeson & Payler (2013) state that when subjected to continuous assessment's, children can experience undue pressures and as a result, this over-reliance and limited evidence can contribute to a narrowed learning experience.

Despite these issue, the Leuven Scale provides a scientific; practical, unique, and useable method of measuring a child's engagement and emotional wellbeing. By taking consideration of the children's emotional health, practitioners can provide a supportive environment, which is paramount in providing quality provisions (Laevers, 1997, 2000. p. 20-29, 2017.; MacRae & Jones, 2020.p. 234-246.; Georgeson & Payler, 2013).

In conjunction with the Leuven Scale and Vygotsky (1962) 'Zone of Proximal Development', the Baby Effective Early Learning Program (BEEL), enables practitioners to evaluate the quality of the interaction of children during activities and additionally the provisions available within the setting (REF). Despite the fact that the (BEEL) assessments follow the same observational techniques as the Leuven Scale, BEEL supports self-evaluation and improvement (Bertram & Pascal, 2006). This reflection-on-action process permits practitioners to focus on their own practice, other than a result-centred approach, to maintain a method of learning that is fresh (Barros Araújo, 2015. p. 249-259; Langston, 2019). This proactive approach provides opportunities for practitioners to evaluate their responses to practice issues such as repetitiveness or a lack of child participation. This observational reflective practice enables individuals to obtain feedback from stakeholders, such as children, parents, and colleagues (Langston, 2019). However, some individuals find this a daunting prospect and others believe it is an opportunity to criticize colleagues on a personal basis, it is nevertheless essential to determine the strengths and weaknesses in both practice and provisions. Bertram and Pascal, (2006) explains that the BEEL Program identifies the baseline of the NMS, however the intention is to use this baseline as a starting point. When individuals are provided with feedback from the observation process, it enables areas of improvement to be recognised (Langston, 2019). Accurate self-evaluation is critical in achieving quality, so it is necessary for practitioners to focus on their own identified improvement priorities, other than an

outsiders opinion (Barros Araújo, 2015. p. 249-259.; Langston, 2019). By utilising a self-assessment guide, it enables practitioners to consider factors that influence the strengths and weaknesses of their practice (Langston, 2019). When identifying weaknesses, individuals must be aware that some personal improvements are beyond their control and cannot be achieved without the help of others (Barros Araújo, 2015. p. 249-259.). NASUWT (2015.p 26); Department of Education (2021. p 8); and Estyn (2021) all disclose that although self-evaluation is essential in providing high quality provision and critical for professional development, it should however not provide to be burdensome and does not require a specific format. Even so, this evaluation tool, is vital in yielding the relevant information required for practitioners to adapt and improve their planning and practice. By taking these considerations into account, the setting has the ability to provide children with a child-centred learning environment, which enables them to achieve a healthy, lifelong learning aptitude (Langston, 2019.; Welsh Government, 2020).

When used simultaneously, the Leuven Scale and BEEL program, provided settings with the ability to address the emotional wellbeing and involvement of all children in all activities. Whilst both have their issues, they do nonetheless challenge professional practice. Enabling children to access quality child-centred learning opportunities to develop their academic, emotional, and social wellbeing (Woods, 2016., Birth to Five Matters, 2010).

In conclusion, settings must strive to achieve a high level of quality, by challenging and adapting their learning environment and professional practice. Vygotsky *et al.,* (1978) and Bronfenbrenner (2007) theories state that for a child to achieve high academic and lifelong learning skills, they must have access to high quality provisions and opportunities. Utilising assessment tool such as the Leuven Scale and BEEL, enables practitioners to gather up-to-date evidence required to support and implement a quality improvement action plan (Bertram & Pascal, 2006). Systematic evidence collection enables practitioners to demonstrate their ability to meet and adapt their practice, needed to achieve outcomes set out in the Early Years Framework, the National Minimum Standards, and the Estyn Inspection Framework (UK Government, 2021.; Care Inspectorate Wales, 2022.; Estyn, 2021). By evaluating practitioners level of training, relationships, and interactions with the children, in conjunction with the observations of child's emotional wellbeing and

activity interaction, practitioners can identify considerations which can impact on the quality of provisions provided (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2022).

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