Reflective paper.

This is a reflective paper which aims to critically analyse what both quality and quality assurance is along with critically analysing quality assurance tools used within the early years.

Cottle and Alexander (2012) state that quality within the early years is a subject that is difficult to define as it has been a subject of mass debate for some time. They state that with such a diverse range of stakeholders with different perspectives on what quality looks like and its benefits on early years care and education there is no clear definition. Cottle and Alexander (2012) state that dependent on status high quality will be seen different. This meaning that children, parents, practitioners and those in managerial roles within a setting will each have a different assumption on the characteristics of quality (Cohrssen *et al*. 2023). However, Moss (2016) states that quality as a concept has a particular meaning that is made up of specific values and assumptions. He states that quality is a constructed concept in the early years and is based on values, beliefs and interests as opposed to one deciding factor. Moss (2016) also discusses quality as being a choice rather than a necessity, this meaning in the early years practitioners choose to enhance the quality of the setting in order to better the outcomes for young children. Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2019) state that quality is important within early years practice and is a term that is continuously spoken about although it is not easily understood and rarely defined. Having said that quality is something that practitioners strive to achieve within their settings (Dahlberg *et al*. 2013).

Foundation Years (no date) state that research has shown that high quality provision in children's earliest years has a lasting effect on children's development right through into adulthood. This is supported by the Welsh Government (2014) who state that it has been proven that high quality provision within the early years supports children to achieve better outcomes academically, socially and emotionally. Siraj *et al*. (2019) agree with the Welsh Government (2014) stating that through research it is evident that experiencing high-quality settings within children's earliest years has a positive impact on their holistic development. They state that the benefits of attending such a setting includes the potential promotion of both

children's short- and long-term development academically and also has the possibility of reducing inequalities linked to families socioeconomic status.

The Welsh Government (2014) discusses that quality with settings is achieved through practitioners continuously reflecting in order for them to be able to both maintain and improve provisions which then results in them offering the highest quality development and learning opportunities within the early years provision. This can be achieved through the setting having high-quality staff, a high-quality environment and therefore high-quality experiences for the children (Welsh Government, 2014). Pascal and Bertram (2018) state that high-quality settings support children to reach their full learning potential and also lead to enhanced child and practitioner well-being. They state that through being inclusive and acknowledging the contribution of children, parents and practitioners settings are able to become high-quality through an approach of quality evaluation and improvement.

Pascal et al. (1998) discuss the importance of early years settings being of quality as research suggests that settings that are not of quality do not bring the benefits desired for young children. Siraj *et al.* (2019) agrees with Pascal *et al*. (1998) and states that although there is a high level of research which shows the benefits of high-quality settings there is still challenges that settings face when ensuring they are providing children with high-quality care and learning opportunities. They state that quality has a subjective nature and is therefore interpreted differently to each person. Stakeholders within a setting will each have a different opinion on what quality looks like and how it is interpreted within the setting. For example, Siraj *et al.* (2019) and Howard et al. (2018) discuss that through research they found that parents perception of children's happiness within a setting as being an important factor of identifying high-quality provision. Whereas policymakers measure according to children's outcomes along with the settings ability to support parents returning to work.

Reed and Canning (2012) state that partitioners within settings can carry out quality improvements which is a process of evaluating aspects of their practice to identify areas in which development can be made to provide a higher quality setting for young children. They state that reflection and taking in stakeholders views is an effective way in which practitioners can improve quality of a setting although this can be difficult as opinions on what high quality is can differ.

Within the REPEY Report Siraj *et al*. (2002) identified that there were several strategies used within settings that were deemed as being effective and high-quality provision that best supported children's holistic development. They found that settings that demonstrated the use of 'sustained shared thinking' more frequently were within the excellent category and those that did not were significantly lower. They state that sustained shared thinking is proven to extend children's thinking and knowledge. The study also noted the importance of practitioners allowing child-initiated interactions along with practitioners modelling as well as periods of shared thinking that included open ended questions which then supports children's cognitive development this is measured through the SSTEW scale (Siraj *et al*., 2002).

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance implies that practitioners and settings need to demonstrate the quality of care and education they provide children to outside regulators (Kauko, Rinne and Takala, 2018). The Welsh Government (2013) state that within Wales they aim for all childcare settings to be at the highest level of quality whilst keeping a focus on four main areas these being: the workforce, leadership, the environment and the experiences of the children. The Welsh Government (2014) state that CIW are the body that are responsible for regulating and inspecting our childcare settings within Wales along with ESTYN that inspect schools.
Foundation Years (no date) state that quality assurance tools are used to support partitioners and settings to recognise what progress they have made in the quality of care they provide to young children but can also highlight arears that they could improve. Mathers, Singler and karemaker (2012) state that there are many different quality assurance tools that can be used to evaluate quality within the early years. They state that one Environment Rating Scale that is used for research, regulation and quality assessment is The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). Clifford and Reszka (2010) state that the ECERS scale is able to reliably measure quality within children's leaning environments. The scale is a tool that is used in many settings internationally as a way of assessing quality. During the EPPE project the ECERS scale was employed as the main measurement of quality through observation (Sylva *et al.* 2006).

The ECERS scale is made up of seven different sub scales ranging from inadequate all the way to excellent and in order to move on to the next level the setting must meet each point in the sections (Nursery World, 2012).
Neitzel *et al.* (2019) state that the ECERS scale is typically used in observation periods of minimum of two hours but typically lasting three hours within which the observer responds to several yes and no targets. There are several points within each sub-section that need to be met before moving on to the next level. Taking into consideration the time frame given for the observation period the scale proves to be restrictive. The observer does not get a clear understanding of the quality of the setting as they are only seeing a very small snapshot of one day (Mathers, Singler and Karemaker, 2012). Once the observation is complete the observer then questions the practitioners within the setting about activities that they carry out with the children that was not witnessed in the time frame and the remainder of the yes/no questions are answered (Neitzel *et al*. 2019). This can be a critique of the scale as there is no clear evidence that the answers the practitioners are giving are correct on the activities they provide for the children within the setting.

Another quality assessment tool that is widely used within the early years is the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being scale (SSTEW). The SSTEW scale requires specific training from those that are knowledgeable in the scale (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015). They state that using the scale requires a high level of knowledge and that it is strongly advised that even practitioners that have carried out other quality assessment tools attend training as the concepts within the SSTEW scale will be new. This is similar to the ECERS scale as this again may be a new tool used and therefore training will be required in order for all professionals using it to have a clear expectancy on each sub-scale level in order for the overall score to be fair.
Similarly, to the ECERS scale the SSTEW scale has sub-scales and each scale is made up of different arears that over all support children's holistic development. Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) list these as being building trust, confidence and independence, socio-emotional well-being, supporting children's language and communication, aiding their learning and critical thinking along with monitoring their learning and language. Unlike the ECERS scale the SSTEW scale is more focused on observation of the adult and how they encourage and support the children within

the setting unlike the ECERS scale that is solely focused on the environment. Although Bleach (2013) discusses the fact that when discussing quality within settings practitioners feel empowered when they feel like their voice is being heard and their opinions are valued. This is not something that is taken into consideration within the scales as they are tick box observations that solely focus on what is seen within the allocated time and the voice of the practitioner is not heard. This is also supported by Cottle (2012) who states that although quality assurance tools are valuable, they often assume a universal understanding of quality. The scales are created by outside experts therefore the scales may not reflect practitioners values, ideas and pedagogical beliefs.

The ECERS and SSTEW scales are similar as they both only provide the observer with a small snapshot of practice within a setting. Gealy *et al*. (2020) states that this can be a limitation as we are not able to assess quality to its fullest in such a small space of time.

Lambert (2019) states that a limitation to observations carried out for both the SSTEW and ECERS scales is the fact that the observer must remain objective. This can be difficult when recording observations as they state that often observers allow their own personal opinion to cloud the ways they comprehend, record and interpreted what they are seeing during the observation period. In order for the scale to be used consistently there needs to be a consistent training programme that supports and instils the knowledge needed to measure quality accurately and fairly within settings. However, Howard et al. (2018) states that the SSTEW scale can be used as a tool for research and inspection but can also be used by educators themselves in order to self-assess and improve their own quality.

To conclude the definition of what quality is and how it looks within early years settings is still up for debate. In order to measure quality, there are many things to consider such as the environment, practitioners, stakeholders opinions along with children's outcomes. There are many tools that both practitioners and outside agencies can use to measure the quality of provision provided by a setting although it may be beneficial to use more than one together in order to provide a more holistic understanding. Many settings aim to provide children with the highest quality as it is proven to support children's leaning and development not only in the early years but through into their adult life.

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