

Reflective Paper

Cottle and Alexander (2012) state that it is evident that there are several stakeholders who show an interest in quality in early years provision, these include parents, children, practitioners, local government, and national government. Bonetti (2018) acknowledges that there is general agreement that high-quality childcare can provide significant improvements in children's outcomes. However, there remains many questions surrounding what high quality provision looks like. Two reports published in 2018 by The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) and The Education Policy Institute (EPI) examine the features of quality in early years childcare provision. The reports found that there are two main ways to look at quality which are structural quality and process quality. Structural quality which is easier to measure and observe such as child-practitioner ratios, group sized and professional development. Whereas process quality addresses the children's daily experiences and ensuring that their needs are being met as well as interactions between children, teachers, and parents. Bonetti (2018) agrees that these two areas are interlinked and to be able to provide 'high quality' childcare provision requires involving both aspects, side by side to be most beneficial to improving children's outcomes and closing the gaps of development that the research has highlighted. However, Langston and Abbott (2006) acknowledge that measuring quality comes with difficulties, as perceptions of quality can change with time, experience, history, and location. Moss (2016) acknowledges the problem with quality and states that we live in an age of quality, where everyone is trying to achieve it and provide a 'quality' service. Moss further acknowledges that there is a certain concept of quality which is measured by the assumptions of experts observing and assessing universal, objective norms, such as developmental milestones. For an Early Years setting to provide quality service, they need to conform to these norms. Dahlberg et al. (2013) affirm that quality can be taken for granted and looked at something that is waiting out there to be discovered and measured by experts. Dahlberg et al. (2013) concluded that quality is instead, the child of a particular time and place, and the concept of quality cannot be conceptualized to accommodate the features of an uncertain and diverse world.

Siraj et al. (2015) describe The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) Scale (2015) as an innovative and exciting new approach based on new findings from the developmental sciences. While other scales have assessed the quality of resources, activities, and curricular provision. The SSTEW scale includes 14 subscales which focus on self-regulation, well-being and the thinking in children which is supported by interacting sensitively with others. Even though the EIF and EPI reports found that successful interactions between structural and process quality can provide high quality provision. Melhuish et al., (2015) acknowledge that the international research base, recognises the most powerful assessment of children's learning and development as the process of adult-child and child-child interactions. Sylva (2014) recognises the benefits of quality Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) a successful support of children's language, communication and thinking skills. Pianta (2012) affirms that SST is a necessary practice to enhance children's learning and development. According to Elsom (2018) a setting where children are emotionally settled, confident and curious is considered a good quality setting. Children should feel secure whilst developing social relationships with both other children and adults, as well as becoming independent in their own care, play and learning. SST is acknowledged in many frameworks across the world, including the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (2009) and England's Foundation Stage (2012). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (2004) Also recognised using SST to clarify a concept and evaluate an activity. In addition to this, SST closely resembles theories of child development, primarily Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (cited in: Grimmer 2018), how a child moves forward with their learning after interacting with a more knowledgeable person. As well as Bruner's ideas of scaffolding children's learning. Kingston and Siraj (2015) presented research on how the SSTEW scale supports quality improvement. The positives of the SSTEW scale were largely recognised, however, the complexity and number of subscales may prevent some settings and staff from implementing it effectively. Particularly supporting extending language and communication, critical thinking, and assessment for learning. Therefore, the SSTEW scale needs to be used by a practitioner with efficient knowledge of child development. There are many factors that contribute towards providing good quality childcare, including the setting and resources. However, it is argued that one of the most important contributing factors is the quality of staff. Elsom (2018) suggests that

practitioners should always be focused on improvement, by sharing good practice with each other, developing trusting relationship with parents to provide the best for every child. Following the Foundation Phase Stocktake (2014), the Foundation Phase Action Plan (2016) has acknowledged staff training and states that one of their short-term goals (2017) was to review the professional learning opportunities available, including child development, experiences, and pedagogy of the Foundation Phase. As well as a long-term goal (2019) to ensure all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes that award Qualified Teacher Status to include child development.

The Environmental Ratings Scales (ERS) (2017) uses four different research scales to assess process quality in Early Years provisions. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised Edition (ECERS-R) assesses the quality of preschool and childcare settings. Brunsek et al. (2017) defines the ECERS-R as a global measure of quality which measures both structural and process aspects of early years settings. It is acknowledged that it was revised to be more inclusive and diverse. Mathers et al. (2012) highlight that even though the ECERS-R has been proven to be effective on a global scale, sometimes it does not reflect the specific requirements for settings or environment such as the Foundation Stage in England. The ECERS-R is mostly used for research or self-assessment to assist quality improvement. A study carried out by Setodji et al. (2017) acknowledged the lack of research into the validity of the ECERS-R. They specifically looked at the link between the scale and children's social and cognitive development. Even though the overall score was good, the ECERS-R was criticised for having a levelling-off effect, with no additional improvements to children's social, cognitive, or language outcomes. Howard et al. (2018) noted the similarity between the ECERS-R and SSTEWS as having strengths in process quality as they both have a strong focus on the quality of the practitioner's role, a child-centred approach and appropriate knowledge of child development and pedagogy that can be applied flexibly. However, the most significant difference between the two scales is the focus of their subscales. Howard et al. (2018) describes the ECERS-R subscales focusing more on the cognitive and academic development of the children (structural quality). In contrast to this, with the SSTEWS subscales focus being on quality interactions, this tends to cover both social and cognitive development (structural and process

quality). There are only two scales which overlap, thus being Literacy and Mathematics.

Following the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project, Mathers et al. (2012) identifies process quality as relating to better outcomes for children in the early years, It was noticed than children who experienced more SST made the most progress. However, Peisner-Feinberg and Yazejian (2010) acknowledge the importance of structural quality for local authorities and governments as it makes it easier to make policies and procedures.

Crosse (2013) discusses The Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC) two quality assurance programmes, Effective Early Learning (EEL) which is for children ages three to six years and Baby Effective Early Learning (BEEL) which is for children from birth to three years. They both support the learning and development in young children while also providing information for continuing professional development. They are also both based around observations which leads to a small action research activity that provides improvements for the staff and setting. Tayler (2015) explains the early years as a 'period as extraordinary developmental growth and of promise regarding human potential and opportunity'. Center (2011) presents research that recognises that a child's initial experiences will decide whether the developing brain provides a weak or strong foundation for future health, behaviour, and learning. Centre for Early Childhood (2021) wrote an article about a nursery in Cardiff who had recently embedded the EEL approach. The headteacher at that nursery school acknowledges that the link between involvement and well-being, encourages a child-centred approach whilst supporting the curriculum development and provision. Pascal (2021) states that feedback has shown that embedding the EEL or BEEL approach can lead to improved learning experiences, support quality communication between parents and children and strengthening the practitioner's collaborative work. Bertram and Pascal (2014) state that the level of involvement is a measure of quality that can be applied to an infinite number of situations to observe at all ages. Specifically, babies, as the extent in which they can concentrate on their environment or respond to an activity can be measured. The Leuven Scale is based around wellbeing and is made up of 5 points which range from extremely low to extremely high. Emotionally Healthy Schools (2022) acknowledges that wellbeing contributes to self-esteem, resilience, and self-confidence. The level of involvement

of the children is deemed to be a necessary factor for in depth learning and development. Learning Journeys (2022) highlight the many advantages to the Leuven Scale, such as the child-centred approach that involves observations. Neaum (2016) state that using observation to understand children's learning and development is good practice. Children's learning is most evident when they are playing so it is through observation that we can understand what they can do and how they understand the world. This allows practitioners to provide flexible and appropriate planning for the individual child. However, according to Learning Journals (2022) one of the main criticisms of The Leuven Scale is that it is not appropriate for children with additional learning needs or disabilities. It has also been noticed that it does not account for children from different cultural background who may behave differently, relating to Bowlby's attachment theory. Unlike, SSTEW and especially ECERS-R which has been revised specifically to be more inclusive for cultures, backgrounds, and inequalities. Despite that disadvantage, Main (2022) argues that the Leuven Scale provides a scientifically recognised teaching and learning tool that provides a practical and applicable way for early years practitioners to quantify engagement and learning.

The Foundation Phase Action Plan (2016) state that high quality early childhood and care is a prominent characteristic in creating an excellent education system in Wales and such provision can reduce inequalities linked to socio-economic status which could have a positive impact on prosperity and economic growth. Following the Foundation Phase Stocktake (2014) the positive practice that was recognised included active learning, child-child and adult-child interactions, high-quality feedback, and opportunities to develop thinking. The Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant (EYPDG) (2018) hopes to address the inequalities we face in Wales. Welsh Government (2018) state that one-quarter of children fail to reach their predicted outcomes because of their socio-economic status. Unfortunately, the Millennium Cohort Study showed that children who were entitled to free school meals could be behind developmentally by up to a year and only 72% of children entitled to free school meals reach their expected outcomes compared to 89% of the other children. Howard et al. (2019) provide evidence to suggest the importance of high-quality education and care in early childhood. The main benefit including the possibility of reducing social inequalities to ensure all children have the same experiences, care,

and education. Siraj and Mayo (2014) support this view and acknowledge the potential for prosperity and faster economic growth in the long term. Welsh Government (2019) acknowledge that the principles, ethos, and pedagogy of The Foundation Phase will be incorporated across the early years as part of Curriculum for Wales 2022 to ensure it is inclusive and appropriate for all practitioners and learners. Welsh Government's Enabling Pathways (2021) has been developed to support the learners leading to progression step 1. The guidance has been designed to ensure it is inclusive to all and even though progression is at the heart of the new curriculum design, it recognises that all children need to be supported throughout their individual learning journey at their own pace. As they reach their milestones of development it should provide them with greater skills to self-regulate and apply what they have learned and make connections across the statements of what matters within the areas of learning and experience HWB (2022). Hatch (2010) argues that there too much emphasis on children's development compared with the greater goal of attending to their learning. Tayler (2015) acknowledged that children's learning and development are connected and unique. There are many ways in which learning, and development intertwine however, the most prominent being Vygotsky who suggested that learning is necessary to activate development. Learning Journeys (2022) acknowledge the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) as providers in comprehensive and up to date training for Early Years Practitioners who believe in quality and sustainability. Their main aim is to support, improve and challenge nursery settings.

Reed and Canning (2012) describe quality improvement as a continuous process rather than a stand-alone event. It should be a process of evaluation to improve and enhance the wellbeing of children. However, Appleby and Andrews (2012) argue that quality improvement can be viewed as a checklist of performance and that is supported by frameworks and external quality insurance programmes. This can be hypocritical to the belief in allowing children to create their own possibilities rather than 'pursuing predefined goals'. Reed and Canning (2012) suggest that the term quality is defined and influenced by perspectives on learning, what has been observed and from individual practical experiences. Reed and Canning (2012) acknowledge the importance of self-evaluation and reflective practice as being

beneficial to quality improvement. As engaging in and exploring experiences, could lead to new understanding and appreciation.

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