

In this paper, the benefits of promoting and ensuring quality in early years settings will be discussed and evaluated, and additionally a critical analysis of 'The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale' and the 'Mosaic Approach' as quality assurance methods in settings will be analysed.

According to Palaiologou (2023) and Leeson and Campbell-Barr (2016, p.30-32), quality should be defined by the social environment of the early years communities which include the parents and children, staff, community and the effect of local and national relevant policies with consideration given to other perspectives, such as ethnic, spiritual and cultural.

However, Rudoe (2020) argues that the definition of quality in relation to education is complex, because of the emphasis on various outcome measures governed by performance data. Moss (2016) and Hadfield and Jopling (2018) agree with this complexity, by expressing a need for a better understanding of what quality means in practice, and asserts that quality is a choice, with leadership practice imprinted by specific approaches, beliefs, values and expectations.

The National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare (*Welsh Government*, 2023, p.10-11) defines high quality provision as continuous improvement and reflection in order to offer the best attainable holistic opportunities and experiences to children and families in Wales, with the perspective to review and enhance the quality and requirements of the service. The regulations underpinned in the Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 (legislation.gov, no date) and the legal responsibility of the quality of care review (Care Inspectorate of Wales, 2019, p.1-3) coincides with this statement, by declaring that the review should form a culture of quality improvement and protection within the setting, with recommendations for improvement. Measuring improvement and quality in settings is also supported by Early Years Wales Quality for All (2020) quality assurance scheme, which is an improvement plan that supports settings to consistently achieve and maintain high standards.

According to an article by Portland Press (2021), high quality early years care is linked to increased vocabulary, improved relationships, enhanced wellbeing and limited negative behaviours. However, Watson (2018), and Buckley, Martin and

Curtin (2020) warns that there is insubstantial evidence and research on what qualifications and qualities practitioners require that will support this high quality care in settings. Mikuska *et al.* (2023) and Tympa and Karavida (2023) combats this argument with more recent research, which states that highly qualified staff benefit the child's social, emotional and cognitive development as well as emergent literacy skills, through quality interactions, language support, resources and structural quality of the setting.

A method used to measure interactional quality in settings is The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale, which focuses on two developmental domains, which are social and emotional development, and cognitive development (Featherbe, 2020). This was developed to increase and improve the practice of sustained shared thinking and high quality interactions and pedagogy between practitioner and child (Howard *et al.*, 2020) which Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015, p.7-8) regard as the most important element of high quality provision, as they believe that in order to achieve this, the practitioner needs to be highly skilled and knowledgeable in assessing the child's holistic development, whilst allowing the child to learn in an optimal environment where they feel safe, comfortable and stimulated in order to think deeply.

This approach also links with Vygotsky's theory of the 'zone of proximal development' and scaffolding (1978, cited in Smagorinsky, 2018), which Vygotsky believed that in order for a child to learn a new concept or skill, they need to work collaboratively with a more knowledgeable other. Similarly, Montessori also adopted this pedagogical approach, by asserting that practitioners should significantly present support towards the child's spontaneous learning and independence, through scaffolding and observation (Isaacs, 2018, p.46-49).

However, in their study using this method of measurement in settings, MacDonald, Gealy and Tinney (2021) highlighted a requirement for high level professional learning for practitioners to achieve high quality practice, skills, knowledge and understanding, to ensure high quality care and support for children's approach and attitude to learning, and their development. Meade and Kwan (2022, p.22-30) agreed with this view, by expressing in their study that the professional learning created by

results of the scale highlighted areas for improvement, and the practitioners responded with reflection and enhancement of their daily practice in particular with their language used when encouraging sustained shared thinking.

Wieduwilt, Lehl and Anders (2023) expand on the benefits of highlighting the need for professional learning in this area to improve quality, by asserting that although scientific research demonstrated a limited effectiveness of embedded language and low quality interactions during daily routines, focused implementation on specific language learning training in practice proved successful, with marked improvement in interaction behaviour and the language development of the children in their care.

The benefits of high quality sustained shared thinking interactions on children's development are highly evidenced by professionals and this practice is also governed under local authorities. The importance of this is declared in the Foundation Phase framework (*Welsh Government, 2015*), where it states that sustained and shared thinking enhances children's learning and extends their development, and Purdon (2021) asserts that this can also contribute to children's happiness and wellbeing due to the involvement and confidence in their development. Although Waibel (2021) states that this pedagogical practice can develop improved cognitive development and lasting beneficial effects that are still identifiable when the child reaches 11 years of age, Waibel cautions that this practice is rarely observed because of stimulation potential of the child, the learning environment and the child's home environment and interests.

Lee and Jackson (2017) agree with this opinion, by stating that family socioeconomic status can have a significant impact on a child's wellbeing and cognitive development, and Akee *et al.* (2018) expand on this theory by expressing that low socioeconomic status can act as an early life stressor, which as a result can lead to mental health conditions in the child's early life, such as developmental delays and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Lee and Kreutzer (2021) agree with this statement, by not only concurring with Akee *et al.*'s association of poor socioeconomic status with mental health conditions, but they also believe that this can cause depression, anxiety, externalising disorders and antisocial behaviours.

Therefore, as the developmental domains to this assessment include social and emotional, and cognitive development (Siraj, Kingston, Melhuish, 2015, p.8-9) an implication of the evidence above suggests that this method of quality assessment may not be suitable for children from a low socioeconomic background, or children that have behavioural or mental health disorders.

However, van den Berg *et al.* (2024) argues that a quality play environment is key for children, regardless of their individual needs or difficulties, and asserts that children that have regular access to an environment where they can connect and engage with nature and the outdoors seem to display an improvement in mental health, self-regulation, self-esteem and attention skills. This recent study coincides with Steiner's approach to play environments, where he believed that children are highly sensitive and therefore are vulnerable to their environment, therefore both indoor and outdoor environments should be of high quality experiences that enable the children to build their confidence and manage the world around them in a safe and comfortable environment (Steiner, 2008, cited in Nicol and Taplin, 2017, p.36-46).

Nonetheless, as LeMasters and Vandermaas-Peeler (2023) and Sandseter *et al.* (2020) proclaim, quality in both outdoor environments and play opportunities can be a barrier to achieving this, because of practitioners assumptions and views on risk. This barrier can be linked to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Sprouts, 2022), where not only can the practitioners views influence the child's perception on outdoor play, but additionally environmental factors in the exosystem can influence opportunities, such as lack of equipment and space in settings (Richard *et al.*, 2023).

The Welsh Parliament (2023, p.1-2) intend to combat this barrier by providing a funded approach to produce a residential outdoor experience that is enriched in education, for every child in Wales in order to remove financial burdens from maintained schools. In addition to this, *Welsh Government* (2019) provide funding for practitioners to undertake training, with the aim to provide children with high quality play and provision, which Care Inspectorate Wales (2024) assert will help to support the child's learning through enriched experiential learning and play experiences that enhance the child's development holistically.

Another method of quality assurance is by adopting the Mosaic Approach. This was created by Clark and Moss (2001), with the aim to allow the practitioner to gather the child's views and perspectives by adopting a multisensory approach with a range of activities, which provided a holistic perspective of the child's opinions and experiences within the setting to provide high quality care and education (Brown and Perkins, 2019, p.109-111).

This method also corresponds with the Curriculum for Wales (*Welsh Government*, 2018) with their approach to pupil voice in the development of their curriculum, and this right is also enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child under article 12, where it states:

"Every child has a right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child's day-to-day home life." (Unicef, no date).

By using this approach for quality assessments, Botsoglou *et al.* (2019) and Binti and Nagy (2023) are convinced that this is a method that assures equality by allowing children to use various communication methods and learning styles to express their opinions, such as drawings, observations, map making, interviews and audio-visual material in order to view the child as whole, regardless of any additional needs. This view links with the Reggio Emilia approach (Hertzog, 2024), where the theory of 'the hundred languages of children' is an analogy for the various ways in which children can express their thinking in different symbolic systems and media, which includes both verbal and expressive arts such as dance, painting, drawing and drama (Merewether and Fleet, 2014).

Furthermore, this view also links with Froebel's theory (1885, cited in Smedley and Hoskins, 2020) about play, and the connection between children's self-directed play used as an outlet for expression of their needs and views, and that this was a method of listening to a child's voice. The Te Whāriki approach also expresses that the child's voice carries worth and value, whether it is expressed verbally or non-

verbally, which involves the practitioner viewing the child express themselves holistically through organic and play-based learning (The Education Hub, 2023).

Additionally, this approach could also be accessible to children that have suffered with adverse childhood experiences, as Pliske, Stauffer and Werner-Lin (2021) and Ray *et al.* (2022) advocate that expressive arts and play environments can offer a suitable means of communication as it can provide safety for both the conscious and unconscious mind, and is the universal language of children.

Nonetheless, Bloom *et al.* (2020) argues that children with communication difficulties are more likely to have restricted ability to express their views, because of a lack of communication means, negative perceived abilities, and insufficient experience for development of the skills required by both children and practitioners.

However, Carroll and Twomey (2021) and Brinton and Fujiki (2017), emphasise the ethical and legal importance of listening to the child, and believe that in these circumstances, practitioners must facilitate the child to communicate their views by providing practical assistance or a range of appropriate methods or tools to allow the child to participate, which links with the Mosaic approach with the use of inclusive methods for self-expression and articulation of their opinions.

By reviewing the evidence above, it is clear that the Mosaic approach can help provide a high quality environment for children, because by using children's voices, this can acknowledge children as being a collaborator and credible informants, and additionally this gathering of data can help service providers to provide improved services and policies, which in turn can improve quality within the setting (Martin and Buckley, 2020). Furthermore, Warwick *et al.* (2029) is convinced that this method is effective as it can cause practitioners to reflect on their practice, and therefore improve teaching and learning that is suitable for the children. Additionally, *Welsh Government* (2016, p.4-26) state that this method recognises children's potential, participation of facilitators of change, and respects children's voice without discrimination, and in a process that is suitable for the individual child to improve quality in childcare settings.

To conclude, by evaluating the evidence about the provision of high quality education and care in the early years, it is evident that this has multiple long term benefits for children. It is apparent that whilst there are clear barriers to achieving this, regardless of which quality assessment tool is used, the advantages to the children's holistic development and wellbeing is indisputable. Finally, the benefits to assuring high quality in settings is distinctly equable to every child, regardless of socioeconomic background, additional learning needs or occurrences in their early lives, due to a broad variety of quality assurance methods available to early years settings, to evaluate and improve their quality of care.

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