

Research and theory alike promote how pivotal a Child's early experiences are in their learning and development, which is agreed by Taylor (2015) who state that a good start in life will have positive consequences throughout that Child's life. This aligns with Public Health Wales (2017) that state a Child's early years can have lifelong implications for learning and development. Furthermore, The Centre of Developing Child (2011) research concludes that the early years is when the foundations for executive function skills are laid, which are critical to a Child's healthy development. Further, stating that the experiences afforded to children in these early years will determine the strengths of these critical building blocks and the positives they will give to children throughout their lives. Cottle and Alexander (2012) further agree that the benefits of quality assurance to children are neurological as well as psychological benefits. Furthermore, Ho, Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2010) consider how quality early years provision can have positive effects on a Child's holistic development, which can even negate such disadvantages as poverty.

Cottle and Alexander (2012) explain that although the term 'quality' is broadly used in government documents and research alike, there is little evidence of the term being defined. However, Ho, Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2010) consider that effort has been made to define the complex term of quality in early years framework curriculum, but calls for an inclusive definition of quality by engaging all stakeholders.

Gray (2022) noted in his research of pre-kindergarten academic programmes that 63% of children were cared for solely at home before attending the kindergarten and suggested that this high figure could account for the harmful effects of the pre-k programme, and perhaps the results could have been different if a higher percentage of children had attended head start or private childcare, highlighting the importance of attending a pre-school setting.

Welsh Government (2016) clearly set out its expectation, in the National Minimum Standard document, the regulations that must be adhered to, which are relevant to the service they provide. However, Dahlberg *et al.* (2013) suggest that minimum is not enough and everyone strives to offer and looks for receiving quality. Furthermore, Moss (2016) state that improving practice, therefore improving quality, will improve Children's outcomes as well as improving outcomes for staff and parents. Ho, Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2010) agree that quality improvement is high on agendas of educational reform in many countries which is demonstrated by the investment countries have made to funding 'free childcare spaces'. Further stating that quality is a concern for all stakeholders including parents, childhood professionals, government officials and policy makers in designing educational systems. Donaldson (2015) report stated that every child is entitled to a high-quality learning experience with high quality

practitioners, knowledgeable in child development, in a high-quality setting, as the correlation between quality of education and the health of society and economy is evident. Welsh Government (2017) further state that to give every child the opportunity to reach high and achieve goals, a high quality, committed workforce is needed. Who will have a strong sense of continuous learning, in high quality early years settings, which will be the foundation for a lifetime of learning and achievement.

Nutbrown (2012) agree that high quality settings can have positive long-term outcomes for children, however state that 'quality' is key, and having knowledgeable staff are a critical element of that quality. Nutbrown (2012) further suggested raising standards, qualifications and training which will improve quality and allow children to receive the very best early education and care they need.

Sylva *et al.* (2004) EPPE research concluded a child attending a preschool, even a part time pre-school, had a significant impact on the outcomes for children through to later life. Stating that quality could be found in any setting, however an effective pedagogy with high quality interactions was needed to ensure success. The research further stating that a quality practice equates to better intellectual and social development for children. OECD (2018) further state that benefits to a high-quality setting also include benefits to health and wellbeing. Projects such as these, recognising the importance of quality early years provision for Childrens outcomes have led to the Welsh Government (2021) pledging to extend free childcare to all two-year-olds, currently only children from disadvantaged backgrounds receive this. Macdonald (2018) agree that quality early years provision supports social, emotional and behavioural development and has therefore led to the development of such interventions as the flying start provision. Welsh Government (2014) guidance state that children who attend a high-quality setting are more independent and are better prepared for Lifes challenges, whilst also stating that quality is linked to better intellectual attainment and improved social relationships. Surmising that quality provision should underpin all flying start childcare. Sylva *et al.* (2004) research suggested that a quality setting would include staff with high level qualifications, an effective pedagogy with a mix of adult led and child led opportunities, links to home environment and interactive relationships between staff and children.

Taggart *et al.* (2015) EPPSE research further suggested that the advantages from a quality early years provision continued throughout a Childs education, demonstrating itself in GCSE examinations, especially in maths and English results. Concluding that high quality pre-school provision is a long-term gain for children. Gray (2022) agreed that research demonstrates how there are better long-term outcomes for play based pre-school and kindergartens compared to

academic components. Sylva *et al.* (2004) stated that the earlier the child attended the setting the better the outcomes for those children. Furthermore, Schleicher (2018) stated that the PISA study found that fifteen-year-old students who attended a pre-school setting for under a year, were three times more likely to underperform than those students who had attended pre-school for more than one year.

Spieb (2013) agree that there is a high return on investment in early years, not only safeguarding the future of the individual child but also contributing to a healthy economy. However, state that even though research demonstrates this, public spending does not reflect this message. Further suggesting that the full potential of quality early years settings will not be realised unless Childrens entire education is invested in. Macdonald (2018) further suggests that until separate entities of education and care work collaboratively together the high achieving outcomes for children will not be realised.

Cottle and Alexander (2012) suggest that whilst rating scales are valuable tools in improving practices, they can assume a universal model of assessing quality, not taking into account the individual settings ethos and values, therefore causing tensions if looking to compare settings. Ho, Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2010) further agreeing that measuring a settings quality should be setting specific and not a national tool, however does promote that by measuring quality through structural rating scales will ensure quality is used in practice.

Evans (2012) state that environmental scales such as Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) and Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS) are useful tools to reflect on self-practice, as well as highlighting good practice and any areas of improvement. Affording quality assurance, training to be prioritised and progress to be demonstrated. Brodie (2017) state that reflective practice is essential to improving any business but is crucial in early years and cannot be overstated. Pacey (2016) agree that reflective practice will benefit children, their families, and the setting as well as supporting quality assurance which will translate in improvements in the setting and show in quality measuring tools.

Harms *et al.* (2017) describe ITERS as a quality improvement tool which predominantly assesses the environment and the opportunities it offers to children, however does include a section on adult interaction in its latest edition. Hofer (2010) state that ECERS is an environmental scale similar to ITTERS where settings are rated between and including inadequate to excellent, based on the environment on offer to children, with a small section dedicated to adult-child interactions. However, Blatchford *et al.* (2002) research demonstrates

how important adult-child interaction and the power of sustained shared thinking opportunities are, suggesting that more attention should be focused on these opportunities.

Mathers *et al.* (2007) state that ITERS are easy to use, transparent, providing training opportunities and track progress steps, however, state the scales must be used consistently and accurately by trained practitioners for maximum effectiveness.

Environmental scales such as ITERS, ECERS and Family Child Care Environmental Rating Scales (FCCERS) are used by such initiatives as flying start, who target investments in children in the most disadvantaged communities in Wales. They include free high-quality, part-time childcare to disadvantaged children, to assess and improve the quality of provision, which is generally assessed in relation to the environment as stated by Welsh Government (2013). Flying start funds were used to train managers and leaders on ITERS to ensure consistency and in order to improve quality in childcare environments. It must be noted that environmental scales are only one method used to monitor children's progress as Schedule of Growing Skills (SoGS) and CIW inspections are also used in flying start settings which are beneficial to improving practice. However, information from these ratings scales are not collated, or reported which prohibits an understanding of how flying start settings are improving in relation to other settings as well as each other. Anomalies were also found in the deliverance of these scales creating tensions if comparisons were being made (Welsh Government, 2013).

Hofer (2010) suggest that there are many factors that could alter the scores received of a rating scale, such as the time frame given to the observation, the time of day and the season, for example beginning of terms. However, state that these rating scales can be used as policy drivers, funding and parental choice of setting as well as being used for research and to improve practice, suggesting that consistency is paramount. Further stating that although ECERS suggest a 3-hour time frame for carrying out observations research demonstrates that a lower timeframe resulted in higher quality scores and a longer time of observation resulted in lower quality scores received. Suggesting that without consistency ratings could be misleading.

Melhuish (2016) discusses how although previous tools used in measuring quality such as ITERS scale were useful, they lacked any thought of practitioner-child interaction which is pivotal to a Child's long term development. Taggart *et al.* (2015) EPPSE case studies were used as a starting point of measuring quality effectively which led to the development of the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) scale.

Center of the developing child (2009) state that relationships are pivotal for the development of a child's brain, which lay foundations for later outcomes, such as academic performance,

mental health and social skills. This aligns with the importance of the SSTEW scale and the relationships practitioners make and the sustained shared thinking opportunities the practitioner affords to the child with such practices as open ended questions. Further stating that 'serve and return' interactions will stimulate a child's heart, and mind. This aligns with Vygotsky (1978) work on children extending their learning with a more knowledgeable other. OECD (2018) agree that staff-child interactions are the primary driver of quality and improving Childrens outcomes. Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) REPEY research looked at excellent practice and derived that sustained shared thinking was a pivotal tool in the interactions children shared with their peers, whether that be another child or an adult, which included open ended questions and the time to ponder and reflect.

Anderson and Gullberg (2014) further suggest that sustained shared thinking can have benefits to both the adult and the child as both can develop confidence and gain self-esteem. The child by being able to find out the answer, and the adult by not needing to know all the answers.

To ensure consistency and best practice, staff should be fully trained in using these quality tools to ensure every child is being treated equally, aligning with United Nations Convention for the Rights of a Child, article 2. (UNICEF, no date) Every setting and child must be consistently assessed using the same method to ensure the scale is being used effectively. However, both the SSTEW scale and the ITERS scale include a cost for training therefore budgets and funding would compromise the tools being used effectively. Tinney *et al.* (2020) discuss the benefits to all staff having the opportunity to take part in training to ensure the same understanding is gained throughout the setting of key messages as opposed to just some staff members receiving the training and then passing it on their interpretations to their colleagues.

A further barrier to these scales being used effectively are the time constraints. These scales would be used in a session, it could be argued that is not long enough to get a full holistic picture of the setting, perhaps needing several sessions to ensure a full view is gained of the setting. Aligning with Pacey (2016) who discuss the importance of observations.

However, Dahlberg *et al.* (2013) questions whether quality can be measured, considering whether 'experts' can enter a setting on any day and measure their quality. Further suggesting that different ages, different settings might have different qualities and suggests that there are many factors in each setting which could cause tension on the result of scales such as these.

For example, staffing could be a barrier, both scales would benefit from staff members with a good knowledge of child development however the result from these quality tools could be decided by how many children were in on that day or the level of supply to regular staff.

Aligned with Gray (2022) who suggested that quality practice is dependent on the qualification of the staff working in that setting as well as the pay they would receive suggesting that investment in early years staff and training would improve quality and therefore Childrens outcomes. Further agreed by Melhuish (2016) who state that the SSTEW scale must involve practitioners who are skilled in assessing, monitoring and supporting a Childs development. Furthermore, Nutbrown (2012) agree that the importance of qualified, experienced staff is crucial to working within early years. Further stating that practitioners must keep developing their knowledge, continue practising their skills and staying up to date with any new policies and legislation to ensure quality.

OECD (2018) state that the focus for measuring quality is too narrow, and suggest that where only one aspect of quality is focused on a more holistic approach is needed. Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) REPEY research study agreed that an environmental scale, whilst it can improve quality in that area, it doesn't give a holistic picture, as it is only focusing primarily on the environment and not adult interaction. OECD (2018) state that an environment that provides children with stimulating, language rich opportunities can compensate for issues that children from disadvantaged backgrounds face therefore perhaps an environmental scale such as ITERS should be used alongside a quality assessment tool such as the SSTEW scale to ensure a holistic view of the setting. Aligning with Welsh Government (2014) which state that a high-quality environment with high quality practitioners equates to a high-quality experience for the child. However, this would depend on previously mentioned constraints such as training, cost and time.

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