

This paper will review the quality of Early Years Settings, it will discuss, and evaluate what quality is? The barriers that organizations face when measuring or meeting quality standards. It will discuss Self-Assessment of Service Statements and how settings can ensure they are providing quality provision through following the Non-Maintained Curriculum Guidance. It will provide a critical analysis of Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales and Environmental Rating Scales.

According to Moss (2016), every setting wants quality on offer. It is often taken for granted as something that is, objective, real, and waiting to be discovered and measured by experts. Pence and Moss (2004) suggest that quality childcare is often in the eye of the beholder, suggesting that quality is how many early years practitioners consider as quality could be based on beliefs, values, and interest rather than universal reality. Dahlberg *et al* (2013) stated that if there continued to be various understanding and multiple perspectives of what quality is then measurement of quality would be meaningless and useless as a tool of evaluation. Moss (2016) argues that to evaluate early childhood education and make a judgement of value, it must first be decided and unanimously agreed on what makes a quality education.

Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (2022) state their inspection framework examines settings on wellbeing, learning, teaching and assessment, environment and leadership, and management. The inspection is based on the National Minimum standards. However, according to Clifton (2021), despite them stating care is overall rated good in Wales inspecting settings on Minimum Standards is not enough to and a focus should be to support all settings to reach excellence. Care and Social Service Wales (2016) explains that from 2016 a new inspection framework was issued where inspectors would spend more time at a setting, discussing the provision with parents and children, viewing records, the environment, quality of staff and leadership and wellbeing of children and staff. Inspections would remain unannounced and would take place once every two years for daytime provision or once every three years for childminders. This would ensure that settings would be more likely to provide high quality provision all the time not just for the inspection process. Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (2016) also explains that every registered childcare provider would have to complete a Self-Assessment of Service Statement every year by law discussing how they monitor, review, and improve quality of care to children.

However, Cottle and Alexander (2012) when carrying out a study on quality in early years settings found that practitioners still felt quality was elusive and suggested that quality was hard to measure, it was described as an ethos or atmosphere and something that was hard to observe because the practitioner was involved in it. They suggested quality was difficult to note on paper and felt pressured into some practices prescribed by the government. For example, in England, children's attainments against their Early Years Foundation Stage profiles and Ofsted ratings were seen to be a measure of quality in some of the settings interviewed, however some other settings felt that although Ofsted outcomes were important, they were not an end goal for quality. These settings still incorporated audit and accountability. This again supports Clifton (2021) view that whilst inspection ratings are important and show that settings are meeting minimum standard and requirements, settings can still exceed expectations and provide outstanding higher quality care than is measured and expected. Early Years Intervention Foundation (2018) explains that they believe there are two ways of looking at quality in early years provision. Structural quality, relating to inputs that are easily measured and regulated such as ratio, staff turnover and teachers training and professional development and then process quality such as day to day interactions between staff, children and parents and the way in which day to day care is met. These two ways are interrelated. This again agrees with the Care Inspectorate Wales (2022) inspection check list where all these factors are taken into consideration to report if a setting is a quality one.

Williams (2016) states that to ensure quality organizations need to have systems and practices, and collections of policies, procedures designed to support and enhance quality. Ho *et al* (2010) suggests that quality in early years education is easier to achieve with national policies and regulatory guidance such as the Early Years Foundation Phase in England. Welsh Government (2022) states that to provide quality early childhood education in Wales childcare settings should be providing enabling adults, to scaffold and support children's learning and wellbeing and effective environments, that are well maintained, safe and suitable and also engaging experiences, experiences that are suitable for the unique child's age and development, authentic learning, to experience real life situations and experiences. Ho *et al* (2010) support this guidance and suggests quality early childhood education is a provision where adults, nurture children to support their holistic development and to support children to understand the world around them.

When measuring quality, the Care Inspectorate Wales (2022) evaluate children's wellbeing at the setting, proving that how a setting nurtures the children in their care and looks after their holistic wellbeing is a major indicator in measuring quality. Hoare (no date) also agree with Care Inspectorate Wales (2022), Welsh Government (2022) and Ho *et al* (2010) when describing the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) study that quality can be defined by adults having warm responsive relationship's with children, engaging in high quality relationships with sustained shared thinking, in settings with clear goals and planning. Staff should have recognized early years qualifications and parents be supported in children's learning.

(The Childrens Act 1989) states that policies need to exist to protect, children's parents and staff and ensure that everyone is clear about the way the organization functions and exactly what procedures to follow should any situation arise. Pacey (2021) describes a policy as a written statement about how an area of practice works, and a procedure details the actions needed to be taken to conduct the policy.

As described by Siraj *et al* (2015) the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS) is an observational practice-based tool to assess practice in Early Education Settings. As Hoare (no date) explain the scales is split into five sub scales, with the first two assessing socio-emotional development and Autonomy and the last three assessing the development of executive skills such as emotional regulation, focusing on tasks and goal setting, and achieving. The focus being on effective communication between adults and children.

Melluish (2004) states that children need practitioners who can support them with their socio-emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development, ensuring children feel safe and comfortable to allow them to be ready to learn. Maslow cited by Bates (2019) supports this as when describing the hierarchy of needs children need their basic needs, such as safety and communication needs met first before they can reach self-actualization and learn new skills. Sylva *et al* (2004) argues that emphasis should be placed on care and education equally as when it is only placed on care and well-being children's cognitive skills suffer.

A benefit of the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale as Siraj *et al* (2015) explains is that during the observation children are observed and treated as unique children in respect of their progress and development not on the belief that all children follow a strict uniformed pattern of development

dependent on their age. This is supported by Welsh Government (2022) that explain that its new non maintained curriculum recognizes that every child is unique and that setting following the new non-maintained curriculum should keep every child's wellbeing at the forefront of its practice. Early Years Matters (no date) also suggests that learning is a process that cannot be rushed and that practitioners should support children with their individual needs supporting their development.

Siraj et al (2015) explains that to record the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale practitioners require training in the process. Mellow (2021) explains that Continuous Development benefits children. It helps practitioners develop new skills and reflect on their practice. Flying Start (2014) states that their staff must undertake five days of continuous professional development per year. However, Millam (2019) explains that often continuous professional development training is often too expensive, or practitioners do not have the time. So, whilst the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale is beneficial to the setting, a downside is that it may be difficult for the setting to meet the cost or provide cover for their staff to attend the training to implement it in the setting.

As Siraj et al (2015) states the completed scale shows how well settings are providing care to the children. It highlights the downfalls. This is beneficial to practitioners to reflect on their practice. As Lindon (2016) states reflective practice is unpinned by continuous professional development and lifelong learning, and that constructive critical analysis of current practice can lead to informed judgement on strengths and weaknesses to support plans and goals for improvements.

Siraj et al (2015) also explain that the observation needs to be conducted accurately, that observation must have taken place for it to be marked, it cannot be something a practitioner has told you about. This means that the practitioners conducting the observation need to be honest, for the report to give an accurate true reflection. Often observations can be mis interpreted as Nutbrown (1996) explains that if educators have tunnel vision sometimes it is not a case of understanding what has been seen but what is really happening, not what adults interpret what is happening.

Siraj et al (2015) states that the SSTEWS scale does not give a full representation of a setting when used as a standalone method of quality assessment as it does not assess space, resources, activities, and curricular provision. They suggest using it

alongside an environmental rating scale as these have been shown to be dependable and valid both nationally and internationally and are related to children's Socia-emotional and cognitive development.

The Shared Sustained Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale can only be used with one group at a time for observation and over one session as explained by Siraj *et al* (2015). Bruce (2005) suggests that it is not just enough to observe and gather information, but the observation needs to be analysed to ensure practitioners can evaluate the appropriateness of what they have provided. Whilst the observation is being analysed, the observation shows a practitioner's behaviours and interactions in one session. So, despite the interaction's being high quality and successful during the observation it may not be a measure of continuous high-quality provision.

According to ECERS UK (no date) environmental rating Scales are standardized tools for the measurement and improvement of quality early years provision. The environmental scales offer a structured approach to improving quality and self-evaluation. The evaluation includes space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and reasoning, provision of activities, interaction, including supervision and support, programme structure, including how children can access their own curriculum, planning schedules and routines and provision to parents and staff. Environmental Rating Scales (no date) explain there are four rating scales to follow dependent on age group of children in the setting.

As Bull *et al* (2017) explains there are seven subcategories, the assessment starts at level one, if all items are awarded then the next categories are evaluated, setting need to score 50 percent or above to move onto the next category. If they do not meet the next category, they stop scoring. Gordon *et al*. (2013) suggests that due to the intended ordering of the ECERS and the stop scoring method, true quality is not displayed. This is because basic indicators such as cleanliness must be met before a setting can be scored on higher level indicators such as teacher-child interactions. Hofer (2010) suggests that settings collect data on all categories to allow a more accurate view of setting quality. Despite this, Bull *et al* (2017) explain that there have been few positive associations between ECERS quality scores and child development.

To conclude, whilst both the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale and the Environmental Rating Scales both have their limitations, they both also benefit early years

settings by providing a basis for audit and quality assurance. When used collaboratively, using the environmental rating scale in its entirety, and not using the stop method, settings can benefit by fully auditing their staff and environmental resources. It provides an insight into the setting's strengths and weaknesses, allowing leaders to reflect and put actions in place to improve their practice, therefore improving children's outcomes.

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