

Reflective paper part 2

Let us begin by considering how children's earliest experiences lay the foundations for their growth and development and how these experiences provide the basis for lifelong learning. Children attending early years provision are at a crucial time in their lives developmentally, making it even more important that they should receive high quality education and care that will positively affect their lives for the better (Ofsted, 2023).

One of the key findings within The Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE) project showed that if early years provision was high-quality it continued to influence children throughout primary school and post – 16 education, and particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and with additional learning needs (Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons and Siraj, 2015). These fascinating findings have proven that high quality early years provision has long term benefits for children's future outcomes and provides further understanding of its importance to those who are interested in its effectiveness (Sylva, *et al*, 2010).

These experiences are influenced greatly dependant on the environment in which adults provide for them with their actions. Notably, alongside a rich environment, adult-child interactions enhance children's learning that can be viewed as high quality provision (Eadie, *et al*, 2022). Furthermore, when defining quality there appears to be no precise term that is utilised, rather that it is something early years practitioners aspire to create and achieve at their settings that develops a 'feel' rather than something you 'see' or can describe (Cottle and Alexander, 2013). It cannot be denied that high - quality education within early years practice is important to children's development, coupled with the expertise of practitioners that can adapt and change to meet the needs of children in their care that support them where and when needed with their learning (Welsh government, 2022). Of course, there is research evidence carried out by (Mathers and Smees, 2014; Gambaro *et al.*, 2015; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018) showing how high levels of staff qualifications in early years settings are linked with high quality standards (Rudoe, 2020, p. 3).

Indeed, it is evident that higher staff qualifications influence children receiving high quality care and education, and it is clear to see the benefits it reaps with children's outcomes. However, there must also be consideration to other areas such as the perspectives of others and what constitutes quality from the stakeholders involved that can provide a wider view on the purpose of early years education and care (Cottle and Alexander, 2013). Rudoe, (2020) further agrees that for a full comprehension of quality, an awareness of both the structural and process aspects in early years settings is needed for a clearer understanding. Mathers *et al*, (2014, cited in Rudoe, 2020, p 4) points out whilst both are important, we must consider many other aspects that influence and maintain high quality, such as continuous

professional development and good leadership that encourages this, along with committed staff that can continually provide a positive atmosphere and attitude (Rudoe, 2020, p. 4). Moreover, it is crucial that practitioners remain in this mindset to always be fully aware of the impact they can make in children's early years through their own learning that leads to constantly be improving their own practice (Taggart *et al*, 2015).

With this in mind, as part of Nutbrown's review (2012) continuous professional development was one of the recommendations to raise professional standards in the early year's workforce, and that it should be an essential part of the early years practitioner's role.

Furthermore, staff should be encouraged and supported by leaders with any continuous professional development. Welsh government, (2022) agrees and recognises as part of the curriculum for Wales that there should be opportunities made for continuous professional learning and development by effective leaders that can be organised 'in house' or outside of the setting. Moreover, Helmerhorst, *et al*, (2015) study recommended further CPD for practitioners gaining further knowledge specifically with interaction. Notably, that further research in 2017 concluded that CPD had made an improvement to adult-child interaction. (Macdonald, Gealy and Tinney, 2021).

It is through various research into quality of early years settings, that there have been multiple assessment tools emerging to measure quality, such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). These sorts of tools are there to not only measure quality but to enhance practitioners' knowledge (Bonetti and Brown, 2018).

As previously discussed, stating that the quality of both structural and process aspects should be considered, it is the use of ECERS that can assess these areas and it is the most widely used tool to assess the quality in early years. It can be used for self-assessment and research purposes that can guide improvements in quality (Brunsek, *et al*, 2017).

According to Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish, (2015, p. 6) it is through research studies that these environmental scales are seen to be valid and reliable that cover academia areas and the emotional environment on the ECERS scale. Kulikovskaya, Chumicheva, Kudinov and Guryeva, (2021, p 4) explain that the use of the ECERS scale focuses on the practitioner being competent enough to see children as capable learners. Similarly, the Sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being scale (SSTEWS) links well together with the use of ECERS. It assesses and examines practice quality which adds a welcomed focus on well – being that is supported with sensitive interactions from practitioners that are experts in creating a positive and engaging environment that can reduce any conflict or distress. Together, this is where sustained shared thinking refers to supportive, knowledgeable adults, that can work with children through play and interactions that can help them express themselves and solve problems (Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish, 2015).

According to the Researching effective pedagogy in the early years (REPEY) study it found that when adult-child interactions included elements of sustained shared thinking, it was noticed to be more evident in the settings that were seen as providing excellent high-quality provision.

Notably, effective use of sustained shared thinking shows how it extends children's thinking and it should be a necessity to use often at early years settings considering how valuable these methods are to children's learning (Siraj-Blatchford, *et al* 2002). For example, when considering Vygotsky's zone of proximal development concept, this acknowledges that with a skilful knowledgeable practitioner who can assess a child who is in need of some support can stand back to allow them to solve problems, but then know when to subtly intervene when necessary. Thus, the child's abilities of what they have achieved together with a supportive adult demonstrates emerging capabilities. With this in mind, it demonstrates that through careful observations from practitioners in settings alongside careful planning of conditions that suit children's individual abilities and interests, it is vitally important to be aware of supporting them in these instances (Conkbayir and Pascal, (2021, p. 81-82). Therefore, a highly skilled early years practitioner who engages in SST that enhances children's development in their care, is an important element to sustaining a high-quality setting that enables children to meet their full potential in an environment where they feel safe and secure to learn (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015, p. 7). However, this can only be achieved if there are staff that are attuned to children's developmental needs and can identify where there may be support needed by fostering early intervention.

Staff who have sufficient qualifications and have had further professional training can improve provision taking it above the minimum standards. Nutbrown, (2012, p. 56-57) maintains that it is through effective leaders who are highly knowledgeable and qualified that can take settings to high standards that are constantly improving provision. Such leaders are good role models who are passionate and lead by example. They can support their staff whilst building a strong team that have a range of qualifications and extra training, that provides them with the confidence and capabilities of providing high quality care and education with children at the setting. Consequently, without this, a lack of understanding on measuring SST can occur. Early years practitioners need to be aware that the SSTEWS scale assesses them on how they support children's learning, and it is through this scale that it considers whether children are feeling comfortable enough in their environment where they are able to find support from their caregivers. Building on trust and communication is amongst the subheadings on the scale and should be adhered to for guidance (Trust for learning, 2022, p. 18).

Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, (2015, p. 8) stress the importance of the scale being a guide only, as where practitioners can recognise all children's differences in abilities, they can adapt their practice to suit individual needs. The scale may be useful by identifying and highlighting where some staff require further training in child development.

As a result, of such findings take for example a study carried out by Kulikovskaya, Chumicheva, Kudinov and Guryeva, (2021) where staff implemented a plan to improve practice according to data found on the ECERS scale used. Training was organised for staff that focused on areas highlighted and where improvements were needed. As a result, staff felt empowered by their skills being improved and felt more motivated, thus improving quality of provision. Following this initial training, two months later a reflective session was held where staff could share their views of the changes that had been made as a consequence of the training. Some discussions of barriers were identified during this time but with some slight tweaks these were overcome. Staff commented how it made the team stronger and gained a mutual respect between colleagues that were able to solve problems together that built on professionalism.

In addition, having more than one measuring tool can identify more factors that impact practice, hence using both SSTEWS and ECERS together. Take for example a study performed by Howard *et al*, (2018) comparing the two scale results and how when compared, it indicated that SSTEWS scale ratings were just as effective at capturing data on quality against the well-established ECERS scale (Macdonald, Gealy and Tinney, 2021).

In conclusion, young children who attend high-quality early years provision is obvious that it has a positive affect throughout their lives and education. It is through the work carried out by the EPPE project that has proved the influence quality has on children's overall outcomes (Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons and Siraj, 2015). Coupled with highly trained early years practitioners who possess the expertise to enhance children's learning. It is through the use of assessment tools that can measure quality to assist with improving practitioners' knowledge and provision provided, that it can continually improve the early years practitioner and the care and education they provide for children. As a result, when staff are supported by a good leader it will, consequently, ensure high quality is sustained at all times. If leaders continue to follow the advice and recommendations of the Nutbrown review (2012) that encourages staff to continue with professional learning as part of their role the standards will remain high.

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