

Leadership and Management for systems of quality

What is quality, and why is it importance?

“Quality in early childhood services is a relative concept’. As such, quality in early childhood services is a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs, and interest, rather than objective and universal reality. Quality childcare is, to a large extent, in the eye of the beholder – and that beholder can be anyone or any group from a range of stakeholders.”

(Pence and Moss, 1994: 172, cited in Moss, 2016)

The early years of a person’s life are of powerful interest as research tells us the early experiences of a young child’s life are recognised as major factors that lay the foundations of their developing mind for future health, learning and behaviours. Everyday experiences are essential for mental development, the anchor of personal identity and self-awareness, and social awareness (Taylor, 2015). Article 6 of the United convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC) states ‘every child has the right to be to life. Governments must do all they can to ensure that children survive and develop to their full potential’ (Unicef, no date). Early years matters (2022) state every child comes from various backgrounds and lives under circumstantial living conditions, these considerations lead us to consider every child as a ‘unique child’, with different abilities and talents distinctly to them. This theory is reflected in the new curriculum of Wales (2022) and Donaldson report (2015) that recognises the unique child and encourage practitioners to offer children equal opportunities, through exploring innovative approaches towards practical activities that support assessment techniques, and showcase the true abilities of every child. Barrable (2019) states children learn and perform at their best when provided with open-ended opportunities to explore stimulating and natural environments in means they feel necessary.

Moreover, Gov Wales (2018) asserts the importance of the environment and how it can be utilised to enhance children’ learning and development, as the environment is seen

as a significant aspect that captures the engagement of children, while promoting high expectations and enabling opportunities for children to achieve positive outcomes. According to Barrable (2019) the design of these areas should be eye catching and of high quality in order to increase children's interaction and produce exciting experiences for children, this includes within the classroom and the use of the outdoors. Taylor (2015) states the importance of practitioners and leaders to recognise the children as central towards their learning and development. However, Gov Wales (2018) highlights the requirement of 'high-quality education workforce', and stresses the importance of committed and strong leadership within the professional learning within their mission. In order to deliver and support the high expectations that Wales has for young learners within the education system. The Donaldson Report (2015) supports this mission and the new curriculum for Wales, with its delivery within settings as having great value to the outcome of educational achievement and the personal wellbeing of children and young people.

So, what is quality? And what does that look like? According to LeanVlog (2021) it is not easy to define what quality is as it depends on certain factors; the dynamics of a cross-functioning team working together, and considering what the customer perceives as quality before delivering a service through regular conversations and meeting with customers, in order to create an alignment and understanding of a value system.

Moss (2016) defines quality as an expertise of establishing standards against performance through assessment, thus determining policy and practice. Quality is an influential providing tool that is used throughout a setting that measures the means of performance by professionals and learners. Furthermore, quality constructs a particular way of thinking and behaving when approaching early childhood education whilst acknowledging diversity, based upon a particular time and place. Meaning, the concept of quality is ultimately open to features of the world, such as value, subjectivity, perspective, complexity (Dahlberg et al, 2013, cited in Moss, 2016).

Importance of quality in Early years settings

“The pursuit of quality in the expansion of integrated early childhood education and care services (ECEC), for children from birth, is now high on the political and social agenda in the UK.”

(Pascal and Bertram, 2012)

This statement is said to highlight minimum standard strategy of evaluation and quality improvement. The Baby Effective Early Learning (BEEL) programme was developed to support and develop quality improvement for settings that cared for children age 0-3 years (Pascal and Bertram, 2012). The Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) (2020) set out an ambitious plan to improve quality in Wales across multiple services in order to influence and drive improvement with highly skilled services that deliver high quality and consistency. Furthermore, in order to progress professional job experience and development, there has to be research-based knowledge through education and training on practical and theoretical information (Siraj and Hallet, 2014). The BEEL programme constructed observations to support practitioners enhance a child's learning on a 'deep-level' while practitioners carry out assessment. The observations are adult-child interactions, meaning the evaluations of the children's learning are relevant to the provisions of the staff. This provides the practitioners with a foundation for professional development and high-quality to the children's learning (Crosse, 2022).

The National Minimum Standards (NMS) incorporates a range of provision that applies to all providers of childcare in Wales. The legislative framework sets out to assist providers to meet regulations relevant to the service they provide on behalf of the Welsh Ministers by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) that aims to improve social care and services for children and settings within the early years (Welsh Government, 2016). However, these standards may be different from one setting compared to another. For example, 'Standard 9: Behaviour of the NSM, section 9.2' discusses a behaviour management policy that states 'methods used must be discussed with parents and fully understood'. In some settings around Wales are in

areas of deprivation and poverty, this standard may be challenging as parents or families could be unwilling to speak with professionals, in turn the setting would not be fulfilling their obligations in aligning with the NMS.

CSSIW designed an inspection framework which highlights any issues that may arise. The framework acts as a guidance for practitioners to work together, to ensure consistency across the setting. Moreover, Quality of care Wales review is a template for practitioners to complete in regards to self-evaluation, these can be used in settings in Wales to record details of quality assurance scheme the professional may participate in in preparation for inspections (Welsh Government, 2015).

Sustained Shared Thinking and emotional well-being scale

In this section I will be discussing Sustained-Shared Thinking and emotional wellbeing (SSTEWS) within early years as a quality assurance method.

Gealy et al (2020) highlight the SSTEWS observations as a collaborative approach to individual learning, this method is also supported in the Flying Start advisory that uses SSTEWS as a form of measuring quality of professional learning in early years settings. According to Purdon (2014) sustained shared thinking (SST) is identified as a problem-solving interaction through rich play experiences that enhance children's performance and learning in early years' settings. While the interaction is child-initiated, SST links with co-construction as both learner and practitioner will contribute to the thinking and fashion a deep learning experience. Similarly, the work of Gealy et al (2020) found that adult-child interactions support the development of young children and enhances their learning in specific areas. For example, supporting problem-solving and curiosity, supporting critical thinking, and enhancing children's development and higher order thinking (Waters and Macdonald, 2018, cited in Gealy et al, 2020).

However, Petty et al (2012) discusses variations between people and the way in which they may interpretate conclusions of their assessment as subject to their own

experiences which can influence the data they collect as perspective. Moreover, a study Purdon (2016) suggested practitioners found it difficult to find sufficient time to complete the activity with each individual child, particularly as not all practitioners within settings had necessary training in order to gain a good understanding of SST. However, this is since been revised in the new curriculum for Wales (2022) that supports settings with training resources. Furthermore, the Donaldson (2015) provides children with more child-led learning for the unique child, suggesting STEW observations could be done during every-day activities as appose to specific scheduled times (Gov Wales, 2018).

Conclusion

Quality assurance involves three components; shared knowledge, consistency and reflective listening. Through research I have found that the term 'quality' is defined by the whole setting working as a collective with the intentions of the same end goal for all children, regardless of their background, ethnicity or living conditions, thus considering all children as the 'unique child' (Early years matters, 2022).

There are numerous methods of quality assurances that settings can incorporate within policy. For example, employers can enhance the quality of practice of their practitioners by completing annual continuous professional development (CPD) for each of their staff. CPD plans enhances knowledge and skills, encourages professional growth and boosts job satisfaction, which in turn benefits learning and development to support the quality of their learner's development of their learners (Early and Porritt, 2014).

Barrable (2019) states the importance of stimulating environments within the classroom and outdoors, that will enhance children's engagement during activities that will deepen their learning experiences. Furthermore, SST and the effective child-adult interactions that the children will experience, through co-construction of knowledge, clarifying concepts and open-ended questions (Gealy et al, 2020). However, as stated in (Purdon, 2016) there are concerns for practitioners in regards to training and time to complete tasks during the working day, the new curriculum for Wales has implemented provision to support practitioners and enhance quality in early years settings (Welsh Government, 2015).

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