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Essay

References

In this assignment I have not used any AI tools to contribute to my work.

Introduction

In Early childhood education and care (ECEC), quality is a main concern with policy and practise, especially when achieving positive outcomes for children. In Wales, statutory frameworks such as National Minimum Standards have baseline expectations for settings to cover safety and care. However, these standards alone are not enough to ensure high-quality provision or enriched learning experiences (Welsh Government, 2025; Sylva et al, 2004). Increasingly, research and policies highlight how important quality assurance systems are that help extend practise, to focus on improvement, reflective practice, and having a child-centred approach in childcare (Welsh Government, 2023a; Department for Education, 2021).

This essay critically reflects on the benefits of promoting quality and goes beyond the requirements, and analyses two key quality assurance approaches. The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales (SSTEW) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS). This discussion is within the Welsh policy context, which includes the Early Years Childhood Play Learning and Care (ECPLC) framework, the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and children's rights legislation.

Quality and statutory Requirements

Statutory requirements allow a foundation for safeguarding and regulations; however, they represent a minimum standard rather than an opportunity for high-quality practice. Evidence from Effective Provision of Pre-School Education projects shows that settings that push higher than the basic standards can achieve far better cognitive and social outcomes for children (Sylva et al, 2004; DfE, 2017). This suggests that quality should be continuous and a developmental process rather than sticking to a basic standard set by regulations.

Welsh policy reflects the change through the ECPLC Quality framework, which promotes reflective practise, collaboration and continuous improvement (Welsh Government, 2024b; Welsh Government, 2023a). Similarly, the Education Endowment Foundation points out that quality interactions and teaching strategies

are a key factor in supporting children's progress (EEF 2021). However, these frameworks aim to move beyond compliance; the implementation can come up against challenges. In practice, there is a risk that quality assurance follows a procedure rather than practice being meaningful, with the focus being on evidence rather than practice. Engaging with children in meaningful interactions.

This reflects broader critiques of the concept of quality. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) argue that quality is based on a social construct and isn't a measurable fact. From this perspective, frameworks may affect practice by prioritising measurable outcomes over contextual factors. This highlights the need for a more refined understanding of quality that shows the value in professional judgement along with accountability.

Critically, Recent research challenges assumptions that quality can be refined universally. Elsie Hunkin and Grieshaber (2024) argue that quality should be understood as dependent on circumstances, constructed through practitioner, child environment and policy interactions. This perspective shows the limitations of quality assurance frameworks that rely on fixed ideas, suggesting that this potentially will not capture the fluidity of practice. Therefore, tools such as SSEW and ECERS allow value in structure that can be applied critically to avoid reducing quality to such measures alone.

Benefits of Quality Assurance Methods

Additionally, the methods of quality assurance methods, such as SSEW and ECERS provide structured approaches to evaluate, and improve early years provision. One of the main benefits of their contributions is to improve the outcomes for children. Research found from the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) emphasises that high-quality provision is linked to improved language development, socially and readiness for starting school (DfE, 2017; EEF, 2021). However, it is important to understand that these improved and positive outcomes are not only the result of the tools but by the quality of how they have been delivered.

These approaches support a rights-based framework, this connects with the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of a child, which support children's involvement, wellbeing and having a voice (United Nations, 1989; Welsh Government, 2022). The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 further backs this up by encouraging long-term effects on the approaches to for wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2024c).

Furthermore, quality assurance approaches contribute to professional development by allowing practitioners to reflect on their own practice and continue to improve based on their findings (Early Years Wales, 2024; Welsh Government, 2023a). However, their effectiveness and efforts depend on the context in implementing their knowledge into practice, training, resources and confidence can all be problems for consistency across settings. This suggests that quality assurance must be supported with enough investment and leadership to understand and achieve meaningful impact on young lives.

Policy and inspections in Wales

Inspection and quality assurance plays a critical role in maintaining standards and improvements in early years provision. In Wales, Estyn highlights the importance of high-quality early years support is provided in communities and to address inequalities (Estyn, 2023; Welsh Government, 2024c). Inspection frameworks allow the chance for accountability and ensure statutory requirements are being followed, while encouraging settings to use reflection to enhance future practices.

The ECPLC framework and Curriculum for Wales guidance emphasise a holistic approach to quality, care, learning and wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2024a; NDNA, 2024). Additionally, the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code highlight the use of inclusive practice to ensure that all children in settings have the same access opportunities to learning (Welsh Government, 2021).

However, there are underlying tensions within the systems. While they are made to encourage improvement, they can also add unnecessary pressure and compliance-focused behaviours. This may reduce opportunities for practitioners to respond

openly to the children's needs. Therefore, this shows the importance of inspection frameworks that show an equal balance in accountability but also support practitioners for professional development.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS)

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale focuses on quality, particularly the nature and quality of adult-child interactions (Siraj, 2015; Kingston and Melhuish, 2017). Sustained shared thinking involves collaboration, problem-solving, which are critical skills for children's cognitive and language development (Sylva et al, 2004; DfE, 2021). Current research emphasises that quality interactions are one of the main contributors to children's development outcomes. For example, Steven Howard et al. (2024) argues that quality, in particular relation to adult-child interaction, has more of a direct impact on a child's learning than structured factors, although they are dependent on them. Similarly, Ning Yang et al. (2021) highlights that high-quality interactions have significant impact to enhance a child's language development.

This Positions SSTEWS as a valuable tool in supporting and promoting pedagogical quality that coincides with Welsh policy (Welsh Government, 2024a; NDNA, 2024). However, the effectiveness of the approach is dependent on expertise and capacity for reflection from the practitioners delivering. Without adequate training, the risk of SSTEWS becomes performative rather than transformative. This then raises the concern whether interaction-focused tools can allow steady improvements without the wider structured support.

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS)

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) is focused on structural quality, especially organising and utilisation of space, resources and set routines (DfE,2021). The scale is a systematic framework to evaluate early years environments and helps to support consistency throughout the provision of settings. Studies have found that having an environment that has been carefully designed and thought out can support engagement and development; the impact is affected by the

interactions in the environment. For example, Karen Tonge et al (2018) state that high-quality interactions in an enriched environment are essential to support children's learning and wellbeing.

However, ECERS is a critical tool as it prioritises environmental factors over relationships and educational learning processes. Research shows that structural quality alone is not effective enough to show and produce enough for children to show improved developmental outcomes (DfE, 2017; EEF, 2021). This may suggest that ECERS may follow a rule-based approach, meaning the objects and resources in a setting are prioritised over having meaningful experiences or use. Therefore, ECERS does show its attributions to baseline quality, but the risk of overlooking the relationship of early years provision.

SSTEW and ECERS are two distinct tools; however, they are two complementary approaches to understanding and delivering quality assurance, understanding processes and understanding structure (DfE, 2017; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2017). When used together by practitioners, they show a deeper holistic understanding of quality by recognising that interactions and environments are key to shaping children's experiences (Sylva et al, 2004; DfE, 2017).

On the other hand, the use of the two tools makes practice more complex. By using multiple tools for quality assurance, this can be an overload of work to put demands on practitioners, reducing time that could be used to have vital adult-child engagement. This can be a problem between accountability and practice, where the need for measurable quality may affect the natural relationship of provision in the setting. Therefore, practitioners should see these tools as developmental frameworks rather than enforced policy. The effectiveness is based on how they are implemented into the everyday practice of the setting by being delivered by strong leadership and reflective practice.

Quality assurance systems play a significant role in professional development and improvements in organisation. Initiatives such as Quality for All promote reflective practise collaboration and continues learning (Early Years Wales, 2024; Welsh Government, 2023a). Additionally, the Information and Advice Quality Framework,

emphasises how important having accessible high-quality services are for practitioners, children and settings (Welsh Government, 2022).

These Frameworks encourage practitioners to reflect on their practise and evaluate to understand and identify the areas that need improvement. Nevertheless, the success is dependent on delivery, without proper training, time and resources.

Inclusion and Children's Rights

Inclusion is a fundamental part of quality in early years provision. The ALN Code for Wales emphasises that provision should be accessible to all and personalised for all children (Welsh Government, 2021; Welsh Government, 2024b). Quality assurance tools can support inclusion by encouraging inclusive environments and engaging interactions between children and adults.

The UNCRC deepens the importance of children's rights, ensuring participation and respect is established in the setting (United Nations, 1989; Welsh Government, 2022). This aligns with Welsh policy priorities and how important the need for child-centred practice.

However, inclusion cannot be fully understood by controlled measures. Quality assurance tools must be flexible to meet all need of the children and within the community. This shows how important professional judgment is when applying quality frameworks as knowledge and training is vital for understanding what the children in the setting need.

Conclusion

In conclusion, promoting quality beyond the statutory requirements is key to achieving meaningful outcomes for children in early childhood education. While statutory frameworks provide a baseline, they can miss or be insufficient when understanding the nature of high-quality provision. SSTEW and ECERS approaches offer great value to quality, allowing the tools to cover different aspects of a setting. However, the tools show that there are limitations to the approaches. The

effectiveness of the tools is based on how they are delivered by practitioners with expertise and knowledge in reflective practise rather than conforming to paperwork.

Overall, the idea of quality in early years remains dependent on context. This suggests that quality should not have a fixed outcome, but an ongoing reflective process that requires engagement, professional judgement and commitment to children's rights and wellbeing.

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