

2000 word Critical Reflection Essay

Introduction

According to Lim, Levickis, and Eadie (2022) Dankiw *et al.* (2020) and Burchinal (2018) childrens overall development is greatly influenced by the quality of care and education they receive in their early years. Irvine *et al.* (2024), Sulaiman and Hussain (2023), and Richards (2022), suggest that statutory requirements offer a starting point, but to create the best possible learning environments, further measures for quality promotion and assurance are crucial. The Early Years Wales (2020) Quality for All Mark, Environment Rating Scales (2014), and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale are the primary strategies that are the subject of this essay's critical reflection.

Quality

Clark (2020), Su *et al.* (2021) Stodden *et al.* (2021) imply in an early years setting, providing high-quality care requires a variety of approaches to support young children's holistic development and wellbeing. Stodden *et al.* (2021), Anderson *et al.* (2021), and Nguyen *et al.* (2021) believe that it involves establishing areas that are secure, welcoming, and exciting in order to encourage children's growth across developmental areas; physical, cognitive, social, and emotional. Pierce (2021), Merrick *et al.* (2020), Daelmans, Manji, and Raina (2021) suggest that secure bonds and healthy connections are developed by responsive and caring interactions between practitioners and children, which is an essential component of quality care. O'Reilly, Devitt and Hayes (2022), Fernández-Santín and Feliu-Torruella, (2020) and Pollarolo *et al.* (2023) share the opinion that putting in place

developmentally suitable curricula and activities that spark the imaginations of the children encouraging critical thinking. Additionally, Liu, Sulaimani, and Henning (2020), Mas *et al.* (2022) and Cohen and Anders (2020) implies that partnerships with families are prioritised in quality care, acknowledging them as partners in their children's educational path. Koliouli, Pinel-Jacquemin and Zaouche-Gaudron (2022) Van-Rhijn *et al.* (2021) and Karlsudd (2021) believes that quality care in the early years creates an environment for children to grow and achieve their full potential by maintaining high standards of practice, ongoing improvement, and a dedication to equality and inclusion.

Early Years Wales Quality for All Mark

Early Years Wales (2020) explains that a comprehensive framework for quality assurance aimed at improving early years childcare services in Wales is the Early Years Wales Quality for All Mark. They suggest that this method incorporates a holistic view of quality, taking into account elements such as leadership, educational settings, and partnerships with families, going beyond the requirements specified by the regulations. They imply, along with Burchinal (2018) that practitioners can show they are dedicated to quality in early years provision and continuous enhancement by following this method.

The Early Years Wales (2020) Quality for All Mark's thoroughness is one of its main advantages. In contrast to Welsh Government (2016) National Minimum Standards, this mark includes a broad range of aspects that together make up high-quality early years services. Factors including management and leadership, the educational environment,

health and safety, collaboration with families, training and staff qualifications may be included in this criteria (Early Years Wales, 2020).

The Early Years Wales (2020) Quality for All Mark promotes a comprehensive approach to childcare by covering numerous quality standards. In addition to adhering to the Welsh Government (2016) National Minimum Standards, practitioners should aim for excellence in every aspect of their profession. This guarantees children get the best possible care, preparing them for achievement in the future.

The Early Years Wales (2020) Quality for All Mark is significant for emphasising continuous enhancement. It takes constant self-evaluation, self-awareness and proactive preparation by childcare practitioners to reach and sustain this standard. By regularly assessing their procedures in comparison to the mark's requirements, practitioners can pinpoint areas in need of improvement and put plans into place to raise the standard of the care that they offer (Early Years Wales, 2020).

This dedication to continuous enhancement is necessary to guarantee that childcare services continue to adapt to the unique and changing needs of children and their families (Early Years Wales, 2020; Rudoe, 2020; Harrison, 2020).

Early Years Wales (2020), Fleer (2021) and Walters (2022) suggests that it creates an environment that is supportive to learning and creativity, encouraging early childhood practitioners to experiment with innovative concepts and standards of care. Hayes, O'toole and Halpenny (2017) and Hallet (2013) suggests that through a process of

reflection and action, practitioners may improve their efficacy and influence on the development of the children throughout time.

Blanden (2022), Irvine (2024) and Burchinal (2018) share the same perspective that a childcare practitioners dedication to quality and excellence is demonstrated when they achieve the Early Years Wales Quality for All Mark. It is an indicator to families, other parties who are involved, and the general public that the practitioner has complied with strict guidelines and shown a commitment to the growth and well-being of young children. This acknowledgement can improve the provider's reliability and reputation, drawing in families looking for a setting that provides children with excellent early years care.

The Early Years Wales (2020) Quality for All Mark is a reliable and thorough method of ensuring quality in early childhood education settings. With an emphasis on continuous enhancement and focusing on several aspects of quality, this mark guarantees that practitioners go above and beyond legal standards to care for young children with high-quality care and education. It encourages excellence throughout the industry and fosters a culture of ongoing development and creativity by providing feedback and acknowledgement. The Early Years Wales (2020) Quality for All Mark, therefore, is critical to improving the lives of children and families in Wales.

Additionally, the Early Years Wales (2020) Quality for All Mark offers a helpful starting point for contrasting and comparing different childcare facilities. Practitioners can assess their performance in comparison to standard practice and identify opportunities for professional development

by aligning their practices to the mark's requirements. Collaborative development and teamwork are facilitated by this measuring process, as practitioners communicate concepts and approaches for enhancing standards throughout the sector (Early Years Wales, 2020).

Environment Rating Scales

Matthews and Lippman (2020) and Eckhardt and Egert (2020) believe that in early childhood education and care settings, structured assessment methods for example environment rating scales are frequently utilised to assess the physical environment's quality.

Matthews and Lippman (2020) Eckhardt and Egert (2020), and The Environmental Rating Scales Institution (2014) explain that the purpose of these scales is to give objective measurements of various environmental factors that affect children's development and wellbeing.

According to The Environmental Rating Scales Institution (2014) The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS), which are both directed towards particular age groups and developmental needs, are two frequently used ERS. The Environmental Rating Scales Institution (2014), Eckhardt and Egert (2020), and Matthews and Lippman (2020) explain that the purpose of the ECERS is to measure the standard of early childhood environments for children between the ages of 2.5 and 5. It is composed of sections that assess many aspects of the environment, such as the arrangement of space and furniture, personal care routine, language-reasoning activities, social interaction, curriculum

structure, and the responsibilities of families and practitioners. With ratings given to each subscale based on measurable standards, a thorough picture of the environment's advantages and limitations are revealed (The Environmental Rating Scales Institution, 2014).

The ECERS's capability to provide childcare providers with targeted feedback that helps them recognise the advantages and disadvantages of their approaches is one of its primary advantages. For example, practitioners can make sure that their educational programme supports language development by evaluating the quality of language-reasoning activities. Additionally, by encouraging practitioners to think about how their environments promote children's development and interaction, the ECERS promotes reflective practice (The Environmental Rating Scales Institution, 2014; Eckhardt and Egert, 2020; Matthews and Lippman, 2020).

The ITERS is designed specifically for assessing settings that provide care for young children up to the age of 2.5. It has sections, just like the ECERS, that assess multiple aspects of the environment, including furniture and areas, personal care routines, literacy and language, social interaction, programme structure, and families and practitioners. However, the ITERS gives special attention to elements like safety and personalised care that are essential to the specialised developmental requirements of infants and toddlers (The Environmental Rating Scales Institution, 2014; Eckhardt and Egert, 2020; Matthews and Lippman, 2020).

The ITERS's emphasis on developing areas that are adaptive and encouraging for young children are an advantage to this method. Infants and toddlers are able to get the support they need to thrive when aspects including the accessibility of developmentally suitable resources and practitioner-child interactions are considered by the ITERS. (The Environmental Rating Scales Institution, 2014; Eckhardt and Egert, 2020; Matthews and Lippman, 2020). Additionally, the scale promotes collaborations that support families and carers, as well as supporting the overall development of children (The Environmental Rating Scales Institution, 2014; Eckhardt and Egert, 2020; Matthews and Lippman, 2020).

However Peterson and Elam (2020) discuss that the Environment Rating Scales have limitations even if they provide insightful information about the quality of early childhood settings. Their dependency on observational data, may not accurately represent the complexity of childcare settings, this is therefore one point of criticism. Furthermore, concerns regarding the scales' general suitability are raised on the reality of specific design elements such as the furniture and environment arrangements may be impacted by local and cultural factors (Peterson and Elam, 2020).

Hansen and Broekhuizen (2021) and Buckley, Martin and Curtin (2020) agree and explain the importance of acknowledging the variations in purpose and broadness between the ECERS and ITERS when comparing them. They argue although the two scales evaluate similar elements of the environment, the ITERS gives more weight to elements unique to infants and toddlers, like attachment bonds and individualised care. In order to guarantee reliable and insightful assessments, childcare

providers must choose the most suitable scale depending on the age group are in their care (Hansen and Broekhuizen, 2021; Buckley, Martin and Curtin, 2020).

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale

Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023), Wieduwilt, Lehrl and Anders (2023) and Brodie (2014) discuss the relationships that develop between practitioners and children are the particular emphasis of the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEW). They imply that the importance of meaningful relationships in fostering cognitive and emotional growth is acknowledged by this method. They also believe that SSTEW offers important perspectives into the interpersonal aspects of childcare settings by rating the quality of interactions by considering elements including shared thinking and emotional support.

O'Connor, Fragkiadaki, Fler and Rai (2021), Brodie (2014) and Bjorklund (2022) agree and suggest that when children and adults engage in prolonged idea investigation, reasoning, and problem-solving together, it's known as sustained shared thinking. They explain that active participation, collaboration, and focused attention on a subject are the key characteristics of these interactions. SST encourages children's critical thinking, language proficiency, and curiosity, all of which contribute to their cognitive development (Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish, 2023; Wieduwilt, Lehrl and Anders, 2023; O'Connor, Fragkiadaki, Fler and Rai, 2021; Brodie, 2014; Bjorklund, 2022).

According to Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023), Wieduwilt, Lehrl and

Anders (2023) and Bjorklund (2022) based on factors like sustained attention, child and adult participation, depth of thought, and sustained attention, the SSTEW assesses the quality of SST interactions. They explain how the scale offers helpful perspectives into the amount to which practitioners support children's valuable educational experiences through prolonged shared thought through observing and evaluating these interactions.

Arace, Prino and Scarzello (2021), Bigras et al. (2021) and Bradford (2021) suggests that children's feelings, emotions, and social interactions in the early years setting are all incorporated into the concept of emotional wellbeing. They imply that it expresses how crucial it is for children to feel safe, appreciated, and encouraged while interacting with classmates and practitioners (Flying Start, 2014). Arace, Prino and Scarzello (2021), Bigras et al. (2021) and Bradford (2021) explain that children's holistic development depends on their emotional health, which affects their resilience, sense of identity, and ability for establishing strong bonds with others.

Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023), Wieduwilt, Lehl and Anders (2023) and Bjorklund (2022) state that by looking at factors such as emotional support, sensitivity to children's needs, and the development of healthy relationships, the SSTEW evaluates emotional wellbeing. Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023), Wieduwilt, Lehl and Anders (2023) Bigras et al. (2021) and Bjorklund (2022) express that children's emotional wellbeing is enhanced when carers provide a warm, nurturing atmosphere and react to their feelings with empathy. Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023), Wieduwilt, Lehl and Anders (2023) explains how the

scale emphasises relationships and emotional support because it understands the importance of the social-emotional area in early childhood development.

Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023), Wieduwilt, Lehrl and Anders (2023) Brodie (2014) and Bjorklund (2022) believe that researchers and early childhood practitioners can benefit from the SSTEWS in a number of ways. For example, it offers a methodical framework for assessing the quality of interactions between practitioners and children, concentrating on important aspects that are crucial to children's growth and learning (Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish, 2023; Wieduwilt, Lehrl and Anders, 2023; Brodie, 2014; Bjorklund, 2022). The scale assists practitioners in improving the quality of their interactions with children and creating the best possible learning environments by highlighting areas of strength and places for improvement (Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish, 2023; Wieduwilt, Lehrl and Anders, 2023; Brodie, 2014; Bjorklund, 2022).

Additionally, Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023), Wieduwilt, Lehrl and Anders (2023), Brodie (2014) and Bjorklund (2022) suggests that SSTEWS highlights the role that practitioners play in fostering children's social-emotional development and stresses the significance of emotional wellbeing in early childhood settings. They express that the assessment supports the holistic approach to early childhood education, which combines the socioemotional and cognitive areas. It does this by incorporating positive connections and emotional support into quality assessments.

Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023), Wieduwilt, Lehrl and Anders (2023), and Bjorklund (2022) shares that the SSTEWS has limitations

even though it provides insightful information about practitioner-child interactions and emotional wellbeing. They explain how the subjective nature of observation and evaluation presents a challenge since it might change based on the observer's biases and perception. Additionally, they share how the scale may overlook contextual factors that affect children's emotional wellbeing outside of the setting because it primarily focuses on interactions within the facility.

Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish (2023), Wieduwilt, Lehrl and Anders (2023), Brodie (2014) and Bjorklund (2022) implies the importance of understanding how relevant SSTEW and other quality assurance techniques are when comparing them to tools like the Environment Rating Scales and the Early Years Wales Quality for All Mark. The SSTEW concentrates on relationships and mental health, whereas the other techniques evaluate more general aspects of quality, such as educational areas and leadership. A more thorough assessment of early years provision is made possible by combining several methodologies.

Critique and Comparison

All of the techniques have their own advantages, but are not without limitations. Although it offers a thorough framework for quality assurance, the Early Years Wales Quality for All Mark might require a lot of effort and money to be implemented successfully. While environment rating scales provide in-depth evaluations of physical environments, they might not take into account the complex dynamics of practitioner-child relationships. In a comparable way, although the SSTEW places emphasis on relationship quality, it might overlook more significant factors of organisational achievement.

Conclusion

In summary, in order to maximise the learning opportunities for young children, more strategies for supporting and maintaining quality in early childhood care settings are crucial. The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale, Environment Rating Scales, and Early Years Wales Quality for All Mark are three methods that offer insightful information on multiple elements of high-quality education and care in the Early Years. Childcare settings can create areas that enhance young children's holistic development by critically evaluating and incorporating these approaches, going above and beyond the requirements set forth by law to attain excellence in early years education and care.

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