

Quality, a reflective paper

What is the quality standard of good practice in early years

Quality in the early years refers to the standards of practice and the environment of the setting in which a child is educated in. The quality of learning, care and the environment, lead in supporting a child's optimal development and well-being during a child's formative years. Practitioners should be skilled educators, who are knowledgeable about child development, and should take a child-centered approach creating activities and routines that are tailored to their abilities, developmental stages and interests of the children in their cohort. (Osgood,2008, 2006) 'Quality is not a destination, but a journey, policy makers, practitioners, parents and communities must work together to ensure the quality of children's educational experiences. Quality requires a relationship based on mutual respect; quality is as it is experienced by the child.

Quality improvement in the early years is crucial to the foundations for a child's development and future success, all settings and all professionals must consider how best to create, maintain and improve provision in order to offer the highest learning and developing experiences for all children and their families. The EYFS Framework (2024), 'states that that the EYFS seeks to provide quality and consistency in all early years settings, so that every child makes good progress'. (DfE, 2017) states, 'early publications from the longitudinal SEED study indicated that ECEC at the age of two is associated with improvement in children's cognitive and socio-emotional development at the age of three'. During the formative years of early childhood, the brain undergoes rapid growth, this is an extremely sensitive period for learning and forming connections. High-quality early experiences can positively shape the development of social, cognitive, and emotional abilities necessary for life-long learning. Findings inline from the (EPPSE) study, (no date) found ECEC continues to relate to improved cognitive and socio-emotional development through primary and secondary school (Sylva et al., 2008; 2012). There is an invested interest in the quality of the early years, invested are stakeholders that continually push for quality, such as the practitioners, leaders, managers, children, parents, local government, national government and supranational organisations (Cottle and Alexander, 2012). Other such stakeholders that share an invested interest in working along with early years settings to

provide high-quality care are speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, dietitians, GPs and health visitors. According to (DfE, 2022) the statutory framework of the EYFS progress check at age two, states what actions practitioners should take to support a child's learning by reviewing the development of the child, their areas of making good progress and identifying any areas for concern. Effective communication is crucial to establish and maintain positive partnership with parents.

According to the Early years inspection handbook (2024) Ofsted is responsible for registration, regulation and inspection of early years childcare provider in England. Early years childcare providers caring for children from birth to age 5 (up to 31 August, following the child's fifth birthday) and for more than two hours a day must register with Ofsted on its early years register. This includes nurseries, pre-schools and childminders, alternatively early years childminders can register with an early years childminder agency instead of registering with Ofsted. It is an offence to provide early years childcare for a child more than 2 hours a day without being registered to one of those authorities. Under section 49(2)(b) of the Childcare Act 2006 requires Ofsted to inspect providers on the early years register within 6 years from their last date of inspection. The Early Years Inspection Handbook for Ofsted Registered Provision (September 2022) states Inspector's will gather the evidence of the effectiveness of staff supervision in the setting, they will want to see evidence of performance management, training and continuing professional development, including evidence of how effectively leaders engage with their staff. Having effective supervision allows for open communication and promoting best practice, giving the opportunity for staff to reflect and self-evaluate on their own practice

Reflection on methods and tools used for quality assurance

Quality assurance in the early years involves activities to monitor, evaluate and improve the quality of care and education provided to young children, ensuring that they receive high-quality experiences that support their development and learning. Stated by the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED, 2017); 'quality is often measured as (a) process quality, this also includes the quality of the curriculum, pedagogical practices and child experiences that support children's development; and (b) structural characteristics, including adult-child ratios, staff qualifications, group size and the characteristics of the physical space (Sylva et al., 2004)'. (Sylva et al., 2004) also states that these factors may be inter-related so that structural characteristics such as staff qualifications have been found to be associated with measures of process quality.

A standard of high-quality is built on key elements in the environment and what the environment can offer a child, does the environment offer the opportunity for experiences, emotional and physical interaction. Does the environment have the correct resources to meet individual needs, do practitioners meet the required qualifications and are the practitioners skilled and have the knowledge to understand and create an enabling environment. Is the space in the setting correct to accommodate each child Indoor activity allows a child to explore the space they have, nursery settings should ensure that the area for children under two years must allow 3.5m² per child, two-year-olds 2.5m² per child, and children aged three to five years, 2.3m². This space should be created to be as interesting as possible, to be accessible and flexible to accommodate children's changing interests and needs, there needs to be the correct ratio of adult to child in the setting.

Over the last 30 years, there has been considerable research documented the mediocre quality of many of the nation's childcare programmes and their ineffectiveness in optimising child development (Coelen, Glantz & Calore, 1979; Helburn, 1995, Keyserling, 1972; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbot-Shin, 2000; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1990). Due to the importance of high-quality child care to children's developmental well-being, as well as large public investment targeted for improving care, the way in which researchers define and measure quality is under renewed examination (Chang, Muckelroy, & Phlido-Toiassen, 1996; Holloway, Kagan, Fuller, Tsou, & Carroll, 2001; Lamb 1998; Love, Schochet, & Mechstroch, 1996; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000; Phillips & Howes, 1987).

Reflecting on both the (ECERS) and (SSTEW) scales, tools that are used to measure the environment, as well as developing strong relationships, effective communication and aspects of self-regulation, these scales are designed to be used for research, self – evaluation and improvement, audit and self- regulation. Both scales support the provision for parent partnership, and for continued staff development.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is a widely used comprehensive assessment tool that measures the quality of the environmental provisions and interactions within an early childhood setting for children aged 3-5 years. This form of assessment tool is designed to collect data through observation in the setting and staff interview, measuring the quality of the setting and the environment it has to offer. Published in 1980, the original ECERS is an observational instrument that focuses on the day-to-day quality of the classroom, activities and interaction (Harms & Clifford, 1980). This measuring tool was

designed as an extension for further supporting academic outcomes of literacy, numeracy, and science, covering areas of the curriculum. Together with a sub-scale on diversity to ensure early childhood staff planned for the needs of individuals in the environment and how the layout of the environment can support this learning. ECERS-R and ECERS-E used together can provide observed measures of physical, social and emotional environment, also assessing pedagogical and curricular practices to support emergent cognitive functioning (Burchinal et al., 2008; Howes et al., 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008). According to, the early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised (ECERS-R) (2024), this scale aims to evaluate the quality provision to celebrate strengths and provide signposts for improvement, providing a rigorous means of measuring quality and the improvement of quality over time. The room layout of the setting and the accessibility of resources, health and safety, provision for activities, interaction and children to access their own curriculum and routines to meet needs are measured through this scale.

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being (SSTEW) scale is a valuable tool for assessing and reflecting on the quality of sustained shared thinking practices, focusing on areas such as social-emotional well-being, language, and learning and child outcomes. The purpose of the scale is to help practitioners to assess and improve their practice in supporting sustained thinking (SST), the study of Assessing Quality in Childhood Education and Care (2015), has been developed further and has naturally been extended relating narrative research data in REPEY, SST has been applied to episodes of non-verbal interactions where two or more individuals work together, in relation to younger children babies or children with English as an additional language. According to the study of Early education and Development (SEED) project in England, (no date) the (SSTEW) scale has been trailed by many practitioners, and academics involved in early childhood research. This scale focuses on areas and various aspects of building trust, confidence, and Independence, social and emotional well-being, supports and extends on language and communication, supports learning and critical thinking and assesses learning and language. The scale uses seven levels from inadequate to excellent, the tool is used by observing interactions and activities in the setting , reflects on the quality of the (SST) using indicators provided in the scale by using it to identify areas of strengths an areas for development, this tool is also used to inform professional development and training . Using the (SSTEW) measuring tools for the use of scaffolding, to support children's understanding and to recognise the support a child needs to reach their next level of understanding. Visal aids, encouraging children to talk to ask opened questions and supporting problem solving, scaffolding children's ideas, active listening and reflection are great advantages to the

children while using this tool will all support (SST). Vygotsky (1978) scaffolding, refers to the temporary support to help children bridge the gap between their current knowledge and further learning

Disadvantages to this tools that can create challenges are having time constraints, it may be best to designate short periods throughout the day, when participating in (SST) it may be best to create small mixed groups allowing multiple children to contribute, cultural and language differences can create barriers.

Shared sustained Thinking is about giving children the opportunity to engage in deeper thinking and discussion, by integrating SST across all areas of learning, we create rich, interconnected educational experience that supports children's holistic development, Vygotsky Zone of Proximal Development (1978) suggested that children learn best when they are challenged with tasks that are slightly beyond their current capabilities, but are within reach with guidance of a more knowledgeable person. Vygotsky' zone of proximal development shares the theory of children learning from collaborative interactions between a child and a knowledgeable other to foster deeper understanding and critical thinking. (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Siraj- Blatchford, 2009) Engaging in SST requires a practitioner who is skilled in assessing and monitoring, how they interact with the child and support their learning will determine the high quality.

To summerise, for nursery settings to achieve a standard of high quality they must use a range of quality assurance scales, using the (SSTEW) scale along with the (ECERS) scale, including (ECERS-E or ITERS-R), these scales are used to measure the environment, and by strengthening the environment of the setting this, can provide practitioners with a more complete picture of what high-quality early childhood care and education can look like giving a whole picture . Giving practitioners the aspirations in what is considered to be high quality pedagogy and practice. The development of the whole child is of enormous importance, and we should meet the child where they are rather than the beginning with a destination in mind' (Bruce, 2009). (Fisher, 2024) it is the role of the adult to uncover each child's strength, interest and approach to learning, this child centered relational pedagogy is at the heart of early education and care.

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