

Leadership and management for systems of quality.

Quality is subjective (Cottle and Alexandre, 2012). It is used in many different instances. Quality is best described as a measurement of condition, status or standard of a service, object, or entity (Oxford Reference, no date). Individuals will perceive quality differently due to different standards individuals will set subconsciously. Quality in childcare is typically based off a combination of several factors for example staff conduct, classroom environment, ratios, supervision, and the well-being of children under their care (OECD, 2020; Welsh Government 2013). A high-quality setting will look safe, hygienic, organised, and filled with resources and toys surrounded by positive staff members with consistent interactions and strong bonds (Pacey, No Date). As a result of high-quality education, it allows a child to develop to their full potential as the child will be supported at a high standard (Sylva *et al.*, 2004, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002, Welsh Government 2013). Although quality is vital in the early years, Moss states individuals could see quality as a choice, not a necessity (Moss, 2016).

During the first five years of a child's life, children are learning behaviourally, cognitively, physically, and socially at a rapid rate, more than they would compare to any other time in their lives (OCED, 2020a). Therefore, it is vital practitioners deliver quality practice to children under their care in the early years as this will affect their development and the rest of their lives. If quality is not delivered, then children will miss out on opportunities they have the right too. As article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) stipulates "Government must provide good quality care, clean water, nutritious food and a clean environment and education on health and well-being so that children can stay healthy" (UNICEF, no date).

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project provides substantial evidence that the quality of a child's education is the product of their environment is a heavy influence of their life's outcome. The EPPE Project focused on the effectiveness of early years education based on schools in England. The results found that settings which had a higher quality standard also had a higher positive outcome for the children in their care (Sylva *et al.*, 2004). The results showed children were more independent and had better intellectual outcomes. Children and staff relationships were also looked at. Their relationships which involved quality showed these children were achieving academically higher especially children with parents who have low qualifications. Staff that had higher qualifications were seen in children's development (Sylva *et al.*, 2004). Nutbrown (2012) and Dallimore (2019) both agree with this statement, also suggesting staff that have higher qualifications reflect on their students, showing a higher outcome in life.

Quality is difficult to measure (Iles, 2019). However, all settings should be following Standard 18 of The National Minimum Standards which states all early year settings should have quality assurance measures in place, as well as policies which should be monitored and maintained to ensure all children are receiving quality care (Welsh Government, 2023). In childcare settings there are tools that are used to measure quality, these assessments are carried out to evaluate how well they are doing and what is needed to be improved (Rusconi, 2024). Measurement is vital in the early years to monitor early childhood development so therefore quality measurement tools are used to look at quality and the impact, which then can be improved to benefit children (Luna-Bazaldua Et al., 2023). National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) is

an example of a quality assurance scheme. It is an award-winning charity that aims to develop, encourage, and maintain high standards in education and care to benefit all children in the United Kingdom (NDNA, no date). NDNA Cymru is a part of this charity and helps early year settings in Wales by working alongside the Welsh government to improve childcare issues in Wales. They provide settings in Wales with support to ensure quality is developing and at a high standard, as well as giving support with advice, policies and procedures, and access to training to maintain quality (NDNA, no date a).

Owston (2023) states that each interaction between a child and a practitioner is a learning opportunity, the quality of the interaction is likely to be more significant than the quantity. The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) Project is another indication that shows quality interactions initiated by teachers is vital in the early years (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2020). The REPEY project found that the settings which use sustained shared thinking, which is where “two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, extend a narrative”, had children progressing more than children in a setting where sustained shared thinking was rarely used (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). Hohmann and Weikart (1995) states this type of learning is called “active learning, learning in which the child, by acting on objects and interacting with people, ideas, and events, constructs new understanding”. Active learning cannot be done without quality practice from practitioners (Education Endowment Foundation, no date).

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being scale

One tool that is used in current practice is called Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) scale. This tool is used on children aged two-five years and used all over the world (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2024). It is used as a quality assurance tool to enhance quality and promote improvements in the early years (Howard *et al.*, 2018). This tool focuses on quality which helps maintained and raise standards in classrooms (Early years Wales, no date). If it was not used there would be no opportunities for quality improvement. This scale focuses on the role of the adult and quality interactions between them and the child (Kingston and Siraj, 2016). Both Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, (2002) and Howard *et al.*, (2018) state sustained shared thinking interactions between children and adults are vital to enhance their language and thinking skills which allows them to be successful in the future. The well-being of the child is also looked at in the observation, Public Health England (2021) suggest that well-being plays a huge part in early years, if a child feels content and comfortable, they are able to develop to the best they can which would lead to positive outcomes in the future also. These statements show the importance of giving opportunities to children in the early years as it will impact their future.

The SSTEWS Scale have five scales altogether which is based on “building trust, confidence and independence, social and emotional well-being, supporting and extending language and communication, supporting learning and critical thinking and assessing learning and language” (Department for Education, 2018). Each area will have fourteen sub scales with level one – seven. The observer will start at one and systematically work through each step if they observe each area then calculate the result at the end (Knowsley Early Years’ Service, 2019). Level one would be inadequate and seven would mean there is excellent quality shown in the setting. The

inspector's role is to get to know the setting before starting and is allowed to ask for planning which influences the observation and result. The SSTEWS scale is carried out over a three/four-hour observation.

It could be argued that this scale has negative aspects. To begin a three/four hour observing period could be seen as a short time to be able to fully gain an in-depth decision on the setting. However, this could be improved by using the scale over a few sessions over a few days so that it is more realistic and gives a clearer idea of what an average week would look like rather than basing off what could be a bad day. Secondly, the scale is based on professional judgement as the individuals carrying out the observation will mark based on what they see. Melhuish (2015) states an important factor of the scale must be that the observer has in-depth knowledge and understanding of child development and learning. If the inspector sees it once, it cannot be guaranteed that they would identify each area. Personal judgement will make it difficult to track consistency (Helm, 2011). Some may tick that area as being done whilst others may need to see it happen a few times to be able to tick it off and say it is being done so therefore each observer will measure quality differently. To prevent this from happening two observers could carry out the scale assessment at the same time and combine their results to gain a more accurate result. Although this would help towards a precise analysis staff in this industry already feel understaffed and having two instead of one would cost more money (Purdon, 2016).

Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale

Another tool that is also used currently in practice is called the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) (Brunsek, *et al.*, 2017). This scale is based on "adult-child interactions; differentiation and formative assessment; parental partnership and the home education environment; discipline and adult support in talking through conflict" (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). Pacey (no date a) states how vital enable environments that are caring and supportive, plays a huge role in supporting children's learning and development. Welsh Government (2023a) state an environment filled with resources should be to its highest standard to ensure children are having the best experience and are not missing out.

This scale has a rating from one to seven and must be started on level one and then work towards level seven, similarly to the SSTEWS scale. An inspector will observe a setting for three hours and then calculate results (Neitzel *et al.*, 2019). Iles (2019) states the observation should be carried out after the children's morning welcome and the short period before going home to gain the best results. When the observation begins staff will not be questioned it is based on what the inspector can see which is different to the previous scale mentioned.

It can be argued that there are limitations of the ECERS. Similarly to the SSTEWS scale the observation that is carried out is based on what the inspector can see and is marked based off the observer's views, which could be biased as quality can be seen differently by everyone (Martin, Elg, and Gremyr, 2020). The scale can be seen as a hard tool to use as the whole column must be completed before moving on to the higher level (Gordon *et al.*, 2013). For example, if the setting misses out 3.2 of section three but showing up to a level seven for every other area on that topic the setting will be marked as a three because they are not completing every area in that level so

would not be able to score higher. Many could argue that this is not fair and does not show the accurate representation as they would be showing all other areas. Time of year can influence the interactions between the staff and children. If the observation was carried out at the start of the year when the children are new, interactions would be different at the end of the year where the staff would have built bonds.

Both tools that have been previously mentioned are often used by practitioners' side by side to gain a better understanding and gain a bigger picture of quality by using both scales together (Siraj *et al.*, 2015; Kingston and Siraj, 2016). To conclude, quality is subjective and can be seen differently by everyone. Quality practice allows children to learn and develop to a high standard which allows high achieving outcomes. There are tools used in early years settings to measure quality to identify what is working well. Although there are both positive and negative aspects of using quality assurance tools, if quality tools were not used there would be no way to identify improvements which is essential when working with children. It is significant to provide the best possible education for early years children as they are developing at a fast pace.

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