

# **Understanding the Importance of High Quality Provision within Early Childhood Education and Care: An analysis of Quality Assurance models.**

*By*

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## **What is Quality?**

Quality provision within the early years is important for the effective development of young children (Sylva et al., 2004, Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, Welsh Government, 2013). Therefore, understanding what contributes toward high-quality provision is important in order to give children the best start in life. High-quality provision within early years settings has a positive and enduring effect on a child's outcomes, such as

language, communication and cognitive attainment (Welsh Government, 2014b, Foundation Years, No. Date). The 'Building a Brighter Future' (Welsh Government, 2013) document, note that high-quality child care settings have a significant influence on child development and have a beneficial impact on future life experiences. Research by Munton et al. (2001) also revealed that attending good quality early years settings have a positive impact on children, in regards to social, language and cognitive development. Furthermore, The EPPE Project - Effective Provision of Pre-School Education, (Sylva et al., 2004) a longitudinal study, discovered that the quality of settings had a long-term effect on academic outcomes and also linked quality provision to improved self-regulation and social communication, as well as lower levels of hyperactivity. The project suggests that quality provision within early year's care can enhance language, mathematical and reading skills, preparing children for future school challenges, and also linked quality provision to a reduction in aggressive and uncooperative behaviour (Sylva et al., 2004). Therefore, it is essential for early years practitioners and settings to strive to provide high quality provision, in order to give children the best start in life, as supported by The Welsh Government (2015a).

However, achieving quality within the early years reveals challenges; for example, Cottle and Alexandre (2012) identify that due to the range of stakeholders involved in early years settings, such as parents, practitioners, children, policy makers and managers, perspectives of quality practice are subjective. For example, research by Howard et al. (2018) discovered that parents and carers value children's happiness as an important aspect of quality provision, whereas policy makers focus on the potential of supporting parents return to work (West et al. 2010). Cottle and Alexander (2012) discovered definitions of quality were not precise and varied according to setting and practitioner experiences. Cottle and Alexander (2012) revealed that some settings were influenced by official motivation and considered statutory inspection reports as a goal for quality, whereas other settings focused more on the social and emotional development of children and concentrate on individual needs of children as a recognition for quality practice. It is therefore important to maintain a balance between providing rich and stimulating play-based experiences, that meet the needs of children, with the requirement and standards of curriculum targets and accountability (Cottle and Alexandre, 2012). Likewise, Ishimine (2011) argues that 'quality' is an elusive concept and difficult to define. Nonetheless, Ishimine (2011)

identifies two types of quality characterisation: Structural quality, which relates to measurable features such as the physical environment, qualifications, ratios, policies and program content; and Process quality which refers to aspects such as child and staff interactions and clear communication, as well as positive peer interaction, which reflects the findings of the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) report (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Anders (2015) suggests that children's learning and development can be directly affected by process quality, whereas structural quality indirectly influences a child's experiences of process quality. Similarly to Cottle and Alexandre (2012), Ishimine (2011) stresses the need for a balance between government support and practitioner skills and qualities, in order to provide high-quality child care for children.

### **Effect of Quality**

On the other hand, a contradicting study by Blanden et al. (2017) published results concluding that quality or 'good' nursery settings, have a weak association on a child's outcomes. However, Sammons et al. (2017) dispute the findings within Blandon et al.'s (2017) paper identifying a number of significant limitations within the studies research design and methods; cautioning the concluding policy implications. The measure of quality within Blanden et al.'s (2017) paper is assessed by Ofsted inspection grades, alongside a child's access to a graduate practitioner as part of the setting work force. However, Sammons et al. (2017) argues this assessment of quality is unreliable as a number of different factors and influences contribute to quality provision within settings (Welsh Government, 2011). Likewise, research by Mathers et al. (2012) indicate that statutory inspection grades in relation to quality measures are weakly correlated, as other contributing aspects should be considered together with inspection reports. Equally, although staff qualifications are important in contributing to effective quality provision and child outcomes (Nutbrown, 2012, Sylva et al. 2004); staff qualifications are a structural measure and should not be considered in isolation of other measures such as, staff interactions, sustained shared thinking, stimulating environments and effective leadership skills (Sammons et al., 2017, Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002).

Standard 18 of The National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2016, p43) stipulate that early years settings have effective quality assurance measures and

policies in place, that are efficiently monitored and maintained, to ensure children and families are benefitting from a quality service. Furthermore, The Welsh Government (2014b) recommend that early years settings register with additional early years umbrella organisations to assist with quality assurance schemes. However, Mercher (2000) suggests early years practitioners are already heavily scrutinised by official and government inspections and may find additional quality assurance schemes a further burden. Mercher (2000) also expresses that differing and subjective quality assurance schemes, from a number of different partnerships, will create confusion and lack consistency in regard to defining quality, with varying approaches being used.

Nonetheless, The REPEY report – Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (Siraj – Blatchford et al. 2002) identified that effective and high-quality settings have a greater influence on a child’s holistic development, as opposed to less effective centres. The REPEY project discovered the most effective settings were settings that encouraged ‘sustained shared thinking’, in order to extend thinking and social skills; and perceived cognitive and social development as complimentary. The study also highlighted the importance of child-initiated interactions, with adults asking open ended questions and acting as role models, to enhance problem solving and higher order thinking skills (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). However, Tanner et al. (2006) argues that measuring quality is difficult, due to the conflicting views on whether quality can be defined as objective and fixed or subjective and dynamic. Tanner et al. (2006) identifies that the understanding of measuring quality presents concerns when attempting to define and measure quality provision within the early years. Nonetheless, in regard to Flying Start settings, The Welsh Government (2014b) measures the success of quality through the combination of a high-quality environment, alongside high-quality practitioners, resulting in high-quality experiences for children, through the careful observation and inspection from Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). However, The Welsh Government’s (2011) ‘Nurturing Children, Supporting Families’ policy statement identifies that quality cannot be measured via a single means, but instead through a number of effective factors that enhance quality childcare provision. The Welsh Government (2011) focus on highly trained staff who are responsive and affectionate, a safe and nurturing environment, appropriate ratios and supervision, as well as developmentally appropriate educational content; in order to promote a child’s holistic development and emotional well-being. Therefore, as

research signifies the importance of providing high quality provision within the early years, this paper will be analysing the effectiveness and benefits of quality assurance methods used to promote quality above statutory requirements.

### **Quality Assurance**

Building a Brighter Future (Welsh Government, 2013) recognise that in order for quality in early years education and care to be improved, four key areas need to be considered including child experiences, leadership, the work force and the learning environment. The importance of the environment is highlighted as a key theme within the joint inspection framework (Estyn, 2019), including aspects such as safety, suitability and quality of resources provided. The Welsh Government (2014b) also emphasize the significance of a high-quality learning environment and conveys that environments and incorporated resources should be of the highest standard to ensure that experiences for children are not restricted.

### **Early Childhood Environment Ratings Scales (ECERS)**

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is an environment rating scale guided by the Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project (Ecersuk, no date). The scale offers a structural approach to improving the quality of early years provision to enhance positive future outcomes. The scale has been used internationally and is a widely used tool to assess quality within settings (Brunsek et al., 2017). The ECERS has been used for fundamental early childhood research such as 'The National Childcare Staffing Study' and the 'The Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study,' and more recently in 'The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES)' in 2003, suggesting its importance and legitimacy within major early childhood research (Clifford et al., 2010).

The ECERS was further developed as part of the EPPE project to provide greater depth and include aspects that relate to the curriculum (Esercuk, no date). Both the ECERS and the ECERS-R are designed to assess quality, incorporating structural and process aspects that attribute to early years settings (Brunsek et al., 2017). The ECERS claims to be reliable and valid and therefore effective in analysing quality and improvements, with a focus on four key areas: interactions, environment, supervision and curriculum (UNC, no date). Although Munton et al. (1997) note the ECERS ratings

are selected on an observational period of approximately two to three hours, by an observer with an approximate four hours of training, the study reveals that reliability is adequate and the ECERS is a beneficial research tool for analysing specific aspects of early years quality provision. However, this research is dated, more recent research by Brunsek et al. (2017) identify that quality assurance tools such as the ECERS often focus heavily on one aspect within education and care settings, resulting in a limited assessment of quality provision. For example, the ECERS's main focus is the learning environment; it does not take into account the views and opinions of children, in regard to their perceptions of the quality of the provision they are receiving or the resulting assessment score. Yet, according to article 12 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1992) all children have the right to express their opinions and judgements, and to be taken seriously, With regard to any matters that may affect them. Nonetheless, the ECERS identifies the importance of quality programmes and ratings are based around seven dimensions including space and furnishing, personal care, provision for stakeholders such as parents and staff, and appropriate activities; in order to assess the quality of settings and whether the future outcomes of children will be promoted (Brunsek et al., 2017). The ECERS includes items such as indoor space, room arrangements and furniture (UNC, no date). Although the space and furnishings subscale includes, 'space for gross motor play' which considers elements of the outdoor space, there is no specific sub heading for outdoor learning. Additional research by The Welsh Government (2009), Bilton (2010), Knight (2011) and White (2014) all emphasize the benefits and enhanced learning experiences that occur in outdoor play spaces. Allowing children to experience nature and participate in hands on activities that stimulate the senses provide rich and engaging learning opportunities for children; suggesting the outdoor environment of early years settings should be emphasized and utilised more to promote quality provision and experiences for children (Welsh Government, 2009).

Research by Brunsek et al. (2017) discovered settings with higher scores in the language and reasoning subscale had the most effect on learning outcomes, particularly language development, in which practitioners were observed to encourage children to communicate, in order to develop thinking skills. However, the study also acknowledges that ECERS and ECERS-R does not consider broader developmental outcomes such as social and emotional development. Brunsek et al. (2017) suggest

more research is needed as early emotional well-being lays fundamental foundations for personal, social and emotional stability and understanding later in life (Njenje, 2017). Early emotional understanding assist children in managing their emotions, as well as the development of empathy for others (Njenje, 2017). Correspondingly, The Welsh Government (2015b) identify the importance of personal and social development, as development is encouraged across all areas of learning.

### *Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS)*

The REPEY project (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) discovered the quality of interactions, including Sustained Shared Thinking in which adults display warm, encouraging and responsive relationships with children, have a significant effect on raising the overall quality of a setting. Howard et al. (2018) and Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) signify the importance of Sustained Shared Thinking in enhancing the successful development of a child's language, learning and thinking skills. Sustained Shared Thinking occurs when individuals collaborate in an intellectual way to extend understanding and contribute to children's cognitive development (Howard et al. (2018). Although the importance of Sustained Shared Thinking has been acknowledged within research, Howard et al. (2018) reveal that practices associated with Sustained Shared Thinking within early years practice are generally poor (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002); suggesting an urgency in supporting and clarifying practitioner understanding in relation to promoting Sustained Shared Thinking and effective practice. Therefore, due to the inconsistencies between research and everyday practice, based upon the ECERS, the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being scale (SSTEWS) was introduced as a quality assurance model, that focuses more on the role of the adult and the pedagogy within settings to support learning and development; underpinned by the research of the REPEY project (Melhuish, 2015).

The nature of the SSTEWS scale supports Sustained Shared Thinking through the adult carefully observing what a child is doing, including body language, and interacting with the child (Melhuish, 2015). Practitioners need to display a genuine interest and give their full attention to the child, respecting the child's decisions and encouraging the child to elaborate (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002, Melhuish, 2015). The SSTEWS scale focuses on the emotional well-being of children, as well as enhancing positive relationships and supporting communication skills through sustained shared thinking. This is

supported within The Social Service and well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014a), which indicates that well-being is paramount. The importance of well-being is also a key area within CIW's Quality of Care Review and The Joint Inspection Framework (Estyn, 2019). Supporting the holistic well-being of children is fundamental for healthy development and academic outcomes (Lewis, 2016).

Like the ECERS, the SSTEWS scale is assessed using a seven-point scale. The key themes of the scale are divided into five sub scales: trust, confidence and independence, social and emotional well-being, supporting language and communication, supporting learning and critical thinking, and assessing learning and language (Siraj, 2015). Similarly to the ECERS scale, analysing interactions which are short in duration can be difficult and not provide an in-depth indication of the quality of interactions. This drawback was noted in relation to the ECERS scale as observations are short, taking place over two hours for a whole setting (Munton et al., 1997).

Areas of the five subscales can be linked to areas of the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2015b) in particular the personal, social and well-being development area of learning, as well as language, literacy and communication skills. This suggests that the SSTEWS scale is effective in supporting curricular targets and ensuring quality provision in relation to academic outcomes. The five subscales also underpin the seven core aims of Implementing Children's Rights (Welsh Government, 2015a) that are incorporated throughout the Foundation Phase. For example, the SSTEWS scale is a quality assurance tool used to enhance the quality of early childhood education and care, giving children the best start in life and support for future development (Welsh Government, 2015a). The Welsh Government's core aims also stipulate that children are listened to and treated with respect, incorporating articles 12,13 and 14 of The UNCRC (UNICEF,1992); which is emphasized within the SSTEWS scale and the effective use of sustained shared thinking. Finally, the core aims highlight that children should have access to a range of learning and educational opportunities and not be disadvantaged by poverty (Welsh Government, 2015a). West et al. (2010) suggests that high quality early years provision can reduce socio-economic inequalities and support parents from a number of different backgrounds. Equally, Nutbrown (2012) conveys that high quality provision within the early years can support and connect children from economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged areas. Therefore,

the SSTEW scale can be used to promote improvements and enhance quality within settings, to close the gap between economic inequalities.

In order for settings to score highly on the SSTEW scale, staff need to be observed interacting with and knowing individual children well, as well as supporting curiosity and questioning from children (Howard et al., 2018). Children should also be observed engaging in developmentally appropriate activities, including risk taking and discussion with practitioners, that support the individual needs of children through a range of learning strategies (Howard et al., 2018). Correspondingly, the SSTEW scale recognises the importance of parent partnerships in supporting quality interactions at home; resulting in consistent learning between setting and home environments (Kingston and Siraj, 2017); also conveyed by standard 6 of the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2016, p22). The SSTEW scale has been designed to support understanding of quality interactions and clarify concepts of Sustained Shared Thinking by interlinking the gap between research and practice (Howard et al., 2018). However, due to the SSTEW scale being a relatively new addition to measuring quality assurance, Howard et al. (2018) suggests further investigation is needed in order to study the validity of the SSTEW scale.

### **Conclusions**

Melhuish (2015) recognises that some practitioners may not be prepared for all aspects of the subscales within the SSTEW scale, for example item's four and five that relate to critical thinking and assessing learning. Therefore, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) suggest that all staff working in the early years should have recognised early years qualifications and trained teachers should be included in the staff of early years settings. Likewise, Melhuish (2015) conveys the SSTEW scale must be used by a professional with sufficient and an in-depth knowledge and understanding of child development and appropriate practice. Nutbrown (2012) agrees, suggesting that staff with higher qualifications who are attuned to children's development and well-being will enhance the quality of settings, suggesting specialists in the early years have the greatest impact on learning and developmental outcomes. Standard 13.4 (Welsh Government, 2016, p35) stipulate that all staff working within early years settings have appropriate qualifications and experience, with at least 80% of staff holding a level two or above qualification in early years. However, The Nutbrown Review (2012) argues

that highly qualified staff are key to high quality provision and suggests all staff be qualified to at least level three. Nutbrown (2012) also advocates a change in the current qualification system is needed, as qualifications are not equipping practitioners with the necessary in-depth skills needed to promote high quality childcare provision.

To summarise, high quality provision is integral for the acquisition of social skills, emotional stability, academic achievements and the independence to play and explore (Welsh Government, 2014b). Children are entitled to quality play and educational services in which they have the opportunities to develop and thrive (Welsh Government, 2015a). Additionally, although challenges exist, quality assurance programs such as The ECERS and SSTEWS scales have been proven to be effective methods in enhancing quality experiences and positive outcomes for children.

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