Policy Forum

Good morning everyone. I’m really grateful to have the opportunity to speak today and the privilege of speaking first as it gives me the opportunity to pose some of the really difficult questions for the other speakers to answer.

My starting point this morning is this quote from the First Minister last year. And like almost every policy statement about early years it talks about quality. And in this case, quality as the ‘golden thread’ that links a system of early childhood education and care. While I couldn’t agree more, like almost every policy paper, it doesn’t tell us what is meant by the term quality.

So, over the next few minutes I’d like to try and unpick the ‘golden thread’ starting by looking at what research has told us over the years about quality in early childhood education and care, then I’m going to talk about how research has framed quality, and then finally touch on the various policy strategies that international research has found to be effective in driving quality improvement in early childhood education and care.

**Slide 1**

So, firstly, how has research looked at quality over the years.

There have probably been three distinct phases of research that have asked different questions about early years quality.

Going back to the 1970s most research in the field focused on the debate around non-maternal care. As families started to use childcare, research attempted to assess the effect of non-maternal childcare on children’s development. An implicit focus of this research was whether childcare was harmful to children. And unsurprisingly, the answer is both yes, and no, as research in this period did not give much consideration to the variable quality of either maternal or non-maternal care. By the way, this is still a research theme that is very much alive and often dangerously politicised to suit ideological positions. You only have to read the Daily Mail to recognise that.

Research in the 1980s and 90s started to address some of the shortcomings of previous studies by looking at the aspects of a setting’s environment that were associated with better developmental outcomes for children, and therefore starting to build a picture of what makes a ‘quality’ setting. A number of assessment tools were developed in this period – mostly developed by psychologists - many of which are still in use today. They recognise to an extent, that quality is multi-faceted, that there are both structural factors – things like staff ratios and staff qualifications, and process factors – such as interactions between staff, children and space – that together contribute to children’s development.

However, while these scales measure the overall level of quality within the setting environment, they rarely account for factors beyond the setting. They also rarely look at quality for children under three.

A third wave of research has more recently recognised the role of the family environment and child characteristics, as well as the impact that early years settings have on improving developmental outcomes. It has changed the focus towards a more complex understanding of quality and added learning and well-being to capture broader outcomes alongside child development. Some of this work has also started to look at children’s rights as a quality indicator, recognising that even very young children are rights holders.

**Slide 2**

So, what we now have is a broadly accepted view of early years quality which comprises of a number of inter-linked elements. And it’s this view of quality that is used in most international studies.

Research shows that process factors are a major contributor to child development, learning and well-being outcomes. Process quality is in turn comprised of three elements: the early years setting itself, children’s families and the wider community. Process quality focuses on the interactions children have with staff, other children, space and materials, their families and communities. It also recognises quality in the interactions between staff, between staff and parents and with the wider community.

That is not to forget structural quality though, which supports and underpins the processes. International research consistently finds strong links between staff qualifications, on-going staff training opportunities, good mentoring, support and leadership and more positive staff-child interactions.

**Slide 3**

So, to take stock for a moment. We can start to appreciate the complexity of the concept of quality. But early years quality does not exist in a vacuum. In this diagram we can see the layers of support needed to build quality provision. I’m going to leave the top layers for Karen, and others to follow-up, but I would like to spend a few minutes focusing on the underpinning structures required to create an environment in which quality can flourish.

And what this diagram shows very clearly, is that the governance, funding and quality principles put in place by policy that underpins everything else.

And it’s probably even more fundamental than that. Policy is often driven by wider societal views about the role of the state and of families in bringing up their children, and the differing views and traditions of education and care.

**Slide 4**

In Wales, we hope that policy should move us towards integration, and away from the split-system of care and education that has shaped the sector since its inception. And according to international research, countries with integrated systems tend to have better outcomes including improved child development, lower inequality and higher parental employment rates. But on its own, integrating care and education is not going to create high quality provision. To do that, a number of other things are needed.

**Starting with children’s rights**

Firstly, there has to be a philosophy that is supported by all the stakeholders involved – parents, educators, policy makers, practitioners and children themselves. In Wales, we already have a really strong commitment to children’s rights that should underpin all government policy involving children and young people. Framing early childhood education and care within a rights-approach immediately starts to break down barriers between education and care. It also provides a supporting philosophy for quality. In essence it answers the critical question about who should be the primary beneficiaries of early childhood education and care. To date it’s often been driven too often by economics and support for working parents, but a rights-based approach places children at the heart of services. And this in turn shapes what quality provision should look like; and gives us a framework for recognising and measuring quality services.

**Taking a whole child approach across the age-range**

At the moment, one of the ways that we differentiate between care and education is by age. From birth to age three, children are in care, but when they’re three they’re in education. Inevitably, in a non-integrated system not enough attention is paid to the cognitive development of younger children, whereas for children aged 3 and above, arguably, not enough attention is given to their health, social and emotional development. A unified approach with equal status given to ‘care’ and ‘education’ has the really exciting potential to change attitudes and foster a whole-child approach to quality across the age-range through developmentally appropriate practice.

**Administrative integration**

Welsh Government say they want to remove the artificial divides between care and education. But currently, responsibility is split across two departments, the sector is governed by different legislation and regulated by separate bodies. While Estyn and CIW are starting to work together, what’s really needed is a single governance framework and inspection system to support and monitor quality. I’ll leave that for discussion later.

**Provider neutrality**

There is a general agreement that direct provision of early years services by the state is not ideal in all circumstances, and that there can be a role for the private and voluntary sector in supplying early years provision that meet local needs – particularly in a country as diverse as Wales. However, there is also a large body of research evidence finding that on most indicators directly state-provided provision delivers higher quality and better outcomes for children**.** Yet this doesn’t have to be the case. The problem of low quality is not related to the type of service, but a funding system that discriminates against non-maintained provision. Nonetheless, there is a debate to be had about state support for provision whose primary aim is generate profit for investors. The international evidence tells us that in such cases, quality is consistently lower.

**Universality**

There is increasing research evidence that universally available provision has the greatest impact of reducing inequality in the early years. Related is the evidence that the greatest gains for children from disadvantaged backgrounds are made in settings with a good social mix, rather than in targeted provision – such as Flying Start.

**Workforce reform and integration**

Research consistently finds links between workforce and quality – by all measures. Most recently, the TALIS study by the OECD highlighted the need to attract and retain a high-quality workforce: This points to policies that need to raise the status of the profession through adequate salaries, reduced sources of instability and stress, and access to relevant and flexible professional development opportunities.

**Consistent curriculum and quality framework**

Finally, quality is linked to a consistent curriculum approach across the age range in schools, day nurseries, pre-schools and childminding provision which combines a broad national framework with the flexibility to meet local needs. Continuous improvement of provision requires internal and external evaluations that involve all the stakeholders developing a shared understanding of quality. So that includes government, local authorities, settings, practitioners, parents, communities and children all involved in defining, supporting and measuring quality.

**Slide 5**

So, to just summarise, some key words here. Quality should be dynamic, continuous and a democratic process – not top-down. And it needs to be balanced across common objectives – care and education – and based on equality.

But we cannot move forward without acknowledging that while the new policy agenda launched last Autumn by Welsh Government should be a defining moment for the early years sector in Wales, we do not as yet know what the sector will look like as we emerge from this crisis.

At first, I believed the crisis might provide a turning point for the status of early childhood, as practitioners caring for vulnerable children and the children of key workers were portrayed as ‘essential’. Childcare was suddenly seen as a key ‘public service’ and a critical sector.

And as many working parents with young children have told us, lockdown gave them a new respect for early years practitioners and the work that they do. It even highlighted the key debate around education and care in the early years. The realisation that early years settings provide key learning opportunities for children – especially the most vulnerable was suddenly apparent to people that previously assumed it was just organised babysitting. And it seemed to be a revelation for many – even in government - that schools provide not just ‘education’ but that they also provide care for children while their parents are working.

Yet, while the crisis has brought these issues into sharp focus, as with many of the positives that have come from the experience, the danger is that the debate and learning will be lost in the dust-settling and economic considerations again become the driving-force. If so, early years care could again be marginalised as a market-driven, low-quality baby-sitting service for working parents. Early learning and learning through play in particular, will again be seen as the unimportant pre-cursor to ‘proper’ school.