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## Reflective Paper

Quality in early years education and care refers to the extent to which provision effectively supports children's holistic development, wellbeing and learning through appropriate environments, interactions and experiences. Within Wales, high-quality provision is characterised by "enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments" (Welsh Government, 2026, A), highlighting that quality is not a single feature but a combination of skilled practitioners, rich play-based learning and safe, stimulating settings. Quality in early years provision is often conceptualised as consisting of both structural and process elements. Structural quality includes factors such as staff qualifications, ratios and environment, whereas process quality focuses on the quality of interactions, relationships and children's experiences (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). While structural elements provide the foundation for provision, it is process quality that has the most direct impact on children's learning and development. This distinction is important when considering tools such as the Leuven Scale and parents' evenings, as both primarily aim to enhance process quality. The importance of quality in early years provision is widely evidenced, particularly during the critical developmental period from birth to five, where experiences significantly shape cognitive, social and emotional outcomes. According to the Welsh Government's Flying Start guidance, quality childcare contributes to children's acquisition of key skills such as communication, concentration and socialisation, all of which underpin later learning and participation in society (Welsh Government, 2025). Furthermore, longitudinal research such as the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project demonstrates that children who attend high-quality early years settings achieve better intellectual outcomes and develop stronger social relationships compared to those who do not (Sylva et al., 2003, cited in Welsh Government, 2026). This evidence reinforces the argument that quality provision has long-term educational and behavioural benefits. The importance of high-quality care is also reflected in Welsh policy frameworks such as the Flying Start programme, which prioritises access to "high quality, part-time childcare" to improve outcomes for children, particularly those in disadvantaged communities (Welsh Government, 2026, B). This policy emphasis aligns with the preventative agenda of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, recognising that investing in high-quality early years provision can reduce

inequalities and support better life chances. Evidence of impact can be seen in outcomes for children who access such provision; they are reported to be more independent, cooperative and better prepared for school, with improved language and academic skills (Welsh Government, 2026, B). Additionally, research indicates that high-quality early years experiences can help mitigate the effects of disadvantage and reduce the likelihood of additional learning needs, particularly for vulnerable groups (Sammons et al., 2003, cited in Welsh Government, 2026, A). Therefore, it is clear that quality is essential not only for immediate child development but also for long-term societal benefits. Overall, quality in early years education and care is important because it directly influences children's developmental trajectories, and its significance is supported by a robust evidence base, Welsh Government policy, and longitudinal research demonstrating improved outcomes for children who access high-quality provision. Quality is not only measured through outcomes but through children's experiences, emotional security, and relationships. To achieve this, practitioners are encouraged to use additional methods and tools to extend and evaluate practice. To support and evaluate such quality in practice, specific tools are used. This essay reflects on the use of the Leuven Scale and parents' evenings, defining each approach, comparing their strengths and limitations, and critically analysing their contribution to quality within early years settings.

The Leuven Scale, developed by Laevers (1994), is an observational tool used to assess children's levels of wellbeing and involvement. Wellbeing refers to the extent to which children feel secure, confident, and emotionally comfortable, while involvement measures the depth of their engagement in activities (Laevers, 2005). Both are rated on a scale from one to five and are considered key indicators of effective learning environments. The theoretical foundation of the Leuven Scale can be linked to experiential learning and child-centred approaches. Lev Vygotsky emphasised the importance of active engagement and social interaction in learning, suggesting that children learn best when deeply involved in meaningful experiences. Similarly, Laevers (2015) argues that high levels of involvement indicate that a child is operating within their "zone of proximal development," where learning is most effective. In the Wales, this aligns with the Curriculum for Wales (2021), which prioritises wellbeing as a core element of learning. The Leuven Scale supports

practitioners in identifying whether their provision meets children's emotional and developmental needs, making it a valuable tool for improving process quality. However, it can be argued that the effectiveness of the Leuven Scale is dependent on practitioner skill and understanding. Without sufficient training or reflective capacity, observations may lack depth and lead to superficial judgements. This raises questions about consistency and reliability across different settings, particularly where staff experience or qualifications vary (Sylva et al., 2004). Therefore, while the tool is valuable, its impact is contingent on the quality of its implementation.

Parents' evenings are meetings between parents and teachers that provide an opportunity to discuss a child's progress and achievements. These sessions allow parents to connect with the teacher, helping to build a supportive and positive relationship. They also offer insight into what the child has been learning at school and how they are developing. In addition, parents can share any relevant information they feel the teacher should be aware of, such as social concerns or aspects of the child's home life that may affect their learning (St Bedes Primary, 2023). This approach can be linked to the ecological theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), who emphasised that children's development is influenced by multiple interconnected systems, including family and educational environments. Parents' evenings facilitate communication between these systems, supporting a more cohesive approach to child development.

In Wales, parental involvement is strongly emphasised within policy frameworks. The Welsh Government (2023) highlights the importance of working in partnership with parents, recognising them as children's first educators. Parents' evenings therefore contribute to relational quality by fostering collaboration and shared understanding. Additionally, it is important to consider issues of equity in parental engagement. Some families may face barriers to attending parents' evenings, including work commitments, language differences or lack of confidence in engaging with educational professionals. As a result, reliance on this method alone may unintentionally exclude certain groups, highlighting the need for more flexible and inclusive approaches to partnership working.

Although both the Leuven Scale and parents' evenings aim to enhance quality, they differ significantly in their focus and application. The Leuven Scale is an observational, practitioner-led tool that focuses on children's internal experiences within the setting (Laevers, 1994). In contrast, parents' evenings are communication-based and rely on collaboration between practitioners and families (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). A key similarity is that both approaches support a holistic understanding of the child. The Leuven Scale provides insight into emotional wellbeing and engagement, while parents' evenings offer contextual information about the child's experiences outside the setting. Together, they contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of children's needs (Welsh Government, 2022; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). However, they differ in terms of methodology and reliability. The Leuven Scale relies on practitioner judgement, which may introduce subjectivity (Laevers, 2015). Parents' evenings, while incorporating multiple perspectives, depend on parental participation and communication, which can vary significantly (Whalley, 2007).

One of the main advantages of the Leuven Scale is its focus on process quality. Rather than measuring outcomes, it evaluates the conditions that support learning, such as emotional wellbeing and engagement. This aligns with research by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002), which highlights the importance of high-quality interactions in early years education. Additionally, the Leuven Scale promotes reflective practice. By observing and assessing children's involvement, practitioners can evaluate the effectiveness of their provision and make necessary adjustments. This reflective approach is essential for continuous improvement and is supported by Welsh Government guidance, which emphasises the importance of ongoing self-evaluation and improvement in maintaining high-quality early years provision (Welsh Government, 2022). Another strength is its ability to support early intervention. Low levels of wellbeing or involvement may indicate underlying issues, enabling practitioners to respond quickly and provide targeted support (Laevers, 1994; Laevers, 2005).

Despite its benefits, the Leuven Scale has limitations. A key issue is subjectivity, as assessments rely on practitioner interpretation. Without consistent training, there may be variations in how the scale is applied, potentially affecting reliability (Laevers, 2015; Sylva et al., 2004). This suggests that while both methods are valuable, they

serve different but complementary purposes. The Leuven Scale provides depth of insight within the setting, whereas parents' evenings provide breadth of understanding across contexts. High-quality provision therefore depends on the effective integration of both approaches rather than reliance on a single method. Furthermore, the scale provides only a snapshot of behaviour, which may not accurately reflect a child's overall experience. Children's emotions and engagement can fluctuate, meaning that repeated observations are necessary to ensure validity. Critically, reducing complex behaviours to numerical scores may oversimplify children's experiences. While the scale provides a useful framework, it may not capture the full depth of learning and development.

Parents' evenings offer significant benefits in promoting quality through partnership working. Whalley (2007) emphasises that involving parents in their children's learning leads to better outcomes and stronger relationships. Parents evenings also provide valuable contextual insights. Parents can share information about children's interests, behaviour, and experiences at home, which can inform planning and support personalised learning. This reflects Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), where collaboration between environments enhances development. Additionally, parents' evenings help build trust and communication, which are essential for effective early years practice. Strong relationships with parents contribute to a positive learning environment and support children's emotional wellbeing (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Welsh Government, 2022).

However, parents' evenings also have limitations. One major challenge is inconsistent engagement. Not all parents attend or feel comfortable participating, which can limit the effectiveness of this approach (Whalley, 2007; Norheim and Moser, 2020). They are also time-limited, often occurring only once or twice a year. This restricts opportunities for ongoing communication and may reduce their impact on practice. Furthermore, there may be communication barriers, such as language differences or cultural expectations, which can affect the quality of interactions. These challenges must be addressed to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness (Norheim and Moser, 2020).

When critically analysing both methods, it is clear that they contribute to different aspects of quality. The Leuven Scale enhances process quality by focusing on

children's experiences within the setting, while parents' evenings strengthen relational quality by building partnerships with families. From a theoretical perspective, the Leuven Scale aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on active engagement and meaningful learning experiences, while parents' evenings reflect Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of development. Both approaches support holistic, child-centred practice, which is central to the Welsh education system (Welsh Government, 2021). However, neither method is sufficient on its own. The Leuven Scale may identify issues but lacks the broader context that parents can provide. Conversely, parents' evenings offer valuable insights but may not capture the detailed observations needed to inform practice. In Wales, where policy emphasises wellbeing and collaboration, integrating both methods is essential. Welsh Government guidance highlights that improving early years provision requires ongoing reflection, evaluation, and collaboration with families, suggesting that a combination of observational tools and parental engagement is most effective (Welsh Government, 2026, A). Critically, this reflects a broader shift within early years education towards reflective, evidence-informed practice. Rather than relying on isolated tools, practitioners are expected to adopt a cyclical approach of observation, assessment, and partnership working. This reinforces the idea that quality is dynamic and must be continuously developed in response to children's needs and contextual factors.

Overall, the Leuven Scale and parents' evenings are both valuable tools for improving quality in early years settings. The Leuven Scale provides insight into children's wellbeing and involvement, supporting reflective and responsive practice. Parents' evenings facilitate collaboration with families, promoting a holistic understanding of the child. While both methods have strengths and limitations, their combined use offers a more comprehensive approach to quality. By integrating observational assessment with parental engagement, practitioners can create inclusive, responsive, and high-quality early years environments. In the Welsh context, this aligns closely with national priorities, emphasising wellbeing, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

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