

Name: Amira Abdelmagied

Student number: 2416824

Module number: ECEY6011

Word count: 2,144

AI STATEMENT

I confirm that I have not presented an AI generated text as my own work. I used Google Translate to assist me as English is not my first language, I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Reflective paper

Introduction

Quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is widely recognised as a key factor in improving outcomes for children. This quality encompasses not just the curriculum, but also the environment, the relationships between educators and children, and the consistency of care (Starting Strong Engaging Young Children Lessons from research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, n.d.)

Defining and measuring quality is challenging because it encompasses multiple aspects, including care practices, learning environments, and interactions between practitioners and children (Sylva et al., 2011).

Although statutory frameworks like the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017) establish minimum standards, they do not guarantee high-quality provision.

These frameworks often prioritize meeting specific compliance requirements rather than encouraging ongoing growth or exploring deeper, more meaningful teaching practices (Ofsted, 2023)

For this reason, many early years settings choose to go beyond the basic legal requirements by adopting additional quality assurance measures. These include formal accreditation programs such as the Wales Pre-school Providers Association (WPPA) Quality for All Mark and the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Quality First scheme, alongside research-based assessment tools like the Environment Rating Scales (ECERS), the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEW), and the Baby Effective Early Learning Programme (BEEL) (Kingston, 2023, Quality Counts, 2023)

This essay will offer a thoughtful and critical reflection on the benefits brought by these additional methods, exploring how they contribute to improving overall quality. The focus will be on two key approaches: quality assurance marks and research-based professional development tools, examining their practical strengths and limitations (Brookfield, 2017, Schön, 1983)

Understanding Quality Beyond Statutory Requirements

Statutory requirements in early years provision focus on safeguarding children and ensuring essential standards are consistently upheld. However, research suggests that simply meeting the minimum standards set for childcare or educational settings doesn't automatically guarantee a high-quality experience for children (Department for Education, 2024, OECD, 2018, Sylva et al., 2010)

Quality typically encompasses three key aspects: structural quality, which includes staff qualifications and ratios; process quality, referring to interactions and relationships; and outcome quality, which focuses on children's development (EduSkills OECD, 2020, Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five, 2017, Sylva et al., 2010)

Process quality plays an important role in shaping children's learning and development. Research by Siraj-Blatchford 2009 emphasises that it is not just the environment or resources that matter most, but the meaningful, responsive exchanges that occur during everyday moments. For example, when educators listen attentively, ask thoughtful questions, and respond warmly to children's ideas, they create a supportive space where curiosity and confidence can flourish. These interactions help build language skills, social understanding, and emotional resilience, laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and well-being (Piaget, 1952, Birthto5matters.org.uk, 2017, Curee.co.uk, 2019, Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002)

This emphasises a key limitation of statutory frameworks, which often focus heavily on measurable, structural elements while overlooking the more detailed, relational aspects of practice (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Department for Education, 2024, Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002)

Additional quality assurance methods play an important role by moving beyond mere compliance and actively helping practitioners adopt more reflective, child-centered approaches (Soni, 2018)

Benefits of Additional Quality Assurance Methods

One of the main benefits of incorporating additional quality assurance approaches is that they help promote a culture of continuous improvement within an organization.

Unlike inspections, which typically occur at set intervals and rely on judgment, quality assurance systems promote continuous reflection and improvement (NDNA, 2025, Soni, 2018).

This idea closely connects with Donald Schön's 1983 influential concept of the reflective practitioner. It described professionals who don't just follow routines but actively think about their actions and decisions as they work. Instead of relying solely on established rules, these practitioners pause to reflect on what's happening in real time, learning from experience.

Another key benefit is the support these methods provide for professional development. Tools like SSTEWS and ECERS provide practitioners with structured methods to observe and evaluate their work, effectively connecting theory with practical application. This encourages the development of deliberate and well-knowledgeable teaching strategies (Kingston, 2023, NDNA, 2025).

Research shows that high-quality early years provision directly contributes to improved outcomes for children, especially in cognitive and social development (Sylva et al.).

Interaction-focused approaches, such as sustained shared thinking, effectively support children's learning (Siraj-Blatchford et al.).

Quality assurance marks offer external validation that boosts parental confidence and enhances the reputation of settings. This also delivers practical advantages by strengthening inspection results and attracting funding (NDNA, 2025).

Critical Analysis of Quality Assurance Marks

WPPA Quality for All Mark

The WPPA Quality for All Mark helps early years settings in Wales enhance their quality by combining self-evaluation with external assessment. One of its key strengths lies in prompting settings to evaluate their practices and ensure alignment with established standards. This can help promote consistency and ensure that children's needs are met effectively (Early Years Wales, 2020, NDNA, 2025).

However, there are also limitations to this approach. One concern is that quality assurance marks often emphasize documentation and evidence collection at the expense of evaluating actual practice. This can encourage practitioners to focus on fulfilling checklist requirements instead of actively enhancing quality. This shows a common criticism of how schools are judged. Sometimes, rules to keep schools accountable can change how people act in ways no one expected (Clarke, 2013, Walls, 2020).

In addition, the process of achieving accreditation can be time-consuming and resource intensive. This could be a problem for smaller places or those with fewer staff. It might make things less fair and harder for some people to access (Clarke, 2013, NDNA, 2025).

NDNA Quality First

The NDNA Quality First scheme prioritizes strong leadership, ongoing staff development, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Research by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) demonstrates that effective leadership plays an essential role in enhancing quality within early years settings, representing a major strength of this approach (NDNA, n.d., Providing Quality Early Childhood Education and Care RESULTS FROM THE STARTING STRONG SURVEY 2018, n.d.).

The scheme also supports workforce development, encouraging ongoing training and reflective practice. This can lead to improvements in both practitioner confidence and the quality of provision (Council for Disabled Children, 2021, Soni, 2018).

However, like the WPPA scheme, there are potential drawbacks. The cost of accreditation can stop some people from joining. Also, these programs might promote one idea of quality that does not fit all the different places and communities. External validation can sometimes overshadow the perspectives and experiences of practitioners and children (Early Years Wales, 2020).

Critical Analysis of Research-Based Tools

Environment Rating Scales (ECERS)

The Environment Rating Scales are essential tools for evaluating the quality of early childhood settings. They provide structured criteria for evaluating factors such as space, resources, and routines. One of their main strengths lies in providing a standardized and reliable method for measuring quality, which is essential when trying to assess and compare performance across different environments. By using a common framework, it becomes much easier to identify strengths, determine areas needing improvement, and share best practices across diverse contexts (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2015).

However, critics argue that ECERS places greater emphasis on structural quality factors than on the quality of interactions. While the environment of a classroom or learning space plays a major role in shaping the overall experience, it does not always provide a clear picture of the quality of teaching or the strength of relationships within it. Also, observations often cover brief timeframes, which can limit the understanding of overall practice (Alison Featherbe -The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales Wellbeing for All in Early Years, n.d., Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2015).

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS)

The SSTEWS scale focuses specifically on the quality of interactions between practitioners and children. It emphasises sustained shared thinking, where adults and children work together to extend learning. This approach is strongly supported by socio-cultural theory, particularly the work of Vygotsky (Alison Featherbe -The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales Wellbeing for All in Early Years, n.d., Melhuish, Siraj and Kingston, 2015, Vygotsky, 1978).

SSTEWS's primary strength lies in its focus on process quality, which research by Siraj-Blatchford et al. identifies as the most important factor influencing children's outcomes. It encourages practitioners to actively engage with children's thinking and encourage their emotional wellbeing (Kingston, 2023, Vygotsky, 1978).

However, SSTEWS can be challenging to implement. It requires a high level of understanding and skill, and assessments can be subjective. Practitioners often

require extensive training to use the tool effectively, which can pose challenges in certain environments (Alison Featherbe -The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales Wellbeing for All in Early Years, n.d., Vygotsky, 1978).

Baby Effective Early Learning Programme (BEEL)

The BEEL programme focuses on improving quality for children from birth to three years. It emphasizes the critical role that relationships, attachment, and responsive caregiving play during this essential stage of development. According to Bowlby (1969), the bonds formed between a child and their primary caregivers lay the foundation for emotional security and social growth.

A major strength of BEEL lies in its ability to fill a notable gap within early years quality frameworks, which traditionally tend to concentrate more heavily on the development and needs of older children. It helps practitioners reflect on their interactions with babies and young children, promoting more sensitive and responsive care (Alison Featherbe -The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales Wellbeing for All in Early Years, n.d., Guest, 2008).

However, BEEL is not as widely adopted as some of the more popular tools available today. This means that finding experienced users or community support can be more challenging. Measuring its impact can also be difficult, as outcomes are often qualitative and long-term (Alison Featherbe -The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales Wellbeing for All in Early Years, n.d., Guest, 2008).

Comparison of Approaches

Quality assurance marks and research-based tools fulfil distinct yet complementary roles when compared. Quality assurance marks offer external validation and ensure accountability, while research-based tools drive internal improvements in practice (Alison Featherbe -The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales Wellbeing for All in Early Years, n.d., NDNA, 2025, Soni, 2018).

However, both approaches have limitation. Quality marks often become bureaucratic and do not always drive meaningful improvements in practice (Liu and Jocelyn, 2025, Walls, 2020).

However, research-based tools often demand considerable time and specialized training to use effectively (Soni, 2018, Yew Chung Education Foundation, 2026).

This suggests that the most effective strategy may lie in combining different approaches. For example, organisations can implement research-based tools and methods to actively enhance their practices, guaranteeing that improvements are grounded in solid evidence and proven techniques. At the same time, using quality assurance marks such as certifications or accreditation badges provides a visible, trusted way to demonstrate and validate these advancements to clients, stakeholders, or regulatory bodies (Alison Featherbe -The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales Wellbeing for All in Early Years, n.d., NDNA, 2025).

Challenges in Quality Assurance

Defining quality consistently remains a major challenge in quality assurance (Moss, 2016). This creates a major challenge when trying to design tools and frameworks that work well across a variety of situations (Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, n.d.).

There are also concerns about reliability and validity.

Observational tools often yield varying results depending on who is using them, as personal perspectives, experience levels, and biases can influence how behaviors or situations are interpreted. For example, two educators observing the same classroom might come away with different conclusions based on what they prioritize or notice (Alison Featherbe -The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales Wellbeing for All in Early Years, n.d., Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998).

Another concern involves practitioners prioritizing assessment criteria over addressing children's actual needs. This can undermine the authenticity of practice and limit opportunities for genuine learning (Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, n.d.).

Finally, resource constraints can pose major challenges for some organizations or settings when it comes to engaging fully with quality assurance processes. Limited budgets, staffing shortages, or a lack of access to necessary tools and technology often mean that these groups struggle to dedicate the time and effort required for thorough evaluations and improvements. This raises important questions about equity and access (Soni, 2018).

Conclusion

To summarize, incorporating additional methods to promote and ensure quality is essential in early childhood education. These approaches not only support the development of young learners but also create a nurturing environment where children can thrive (Childcarecanada.org, 2024).

While statutory frameworks provide a necessary foundation by setting clear rules and standards, they alone cannot guarantee the delivery of truly high-quality provision. These legal requirements establish important minimum expectations, but the real difference often comes down to how organizations interpret and go beyond these guidelines in practice (Routledge & CRC Press, n.d.).

Quality assurance marks such as WPPA and NDNA provide valuable external validation and promote accountability. Meanwhile, research-based tools like ECERS, SSTEWS, and BEEL offer detailed insights into practice and promote professional development (Melhuish, Siraj and Kingston, 2015).

These frameworks offer detailed insights into the day-to-day practices within early education settings. By focusing on specific aspects such as the learning environment, emotional development, and interactions between adults and children, they provide practitioners with actionable feedback. This helps educators reflect on their methods, identify areas for growth, and engage in meaningful professional development eventually leading to richer, more effective learning experiences for children (Melhuish, Siraj and Kingston, 2015).

Both approaches present challenges, such as high costs, subjective judgments, and the potential for superficial compliance. However, both approaches come with their own set of challenges. For one, the costs involved can be major not just in terms of money, but also time and resources. Then there is the issue of subjectivity different

people might interpret guidelines or results in varying ways, which can lead to inconsistent outcomes (Melhuish, Siraj and Kingston, 2015, Soni, 2018).

Taking a balanced approach that combines external accreditation with reflective, research-knowledgeable practice tends to be the most effective way to ensure quality and continuous improvement. External accreditation provides a structured framework and objective standards, offering valuable benchmarks that help organizations or individuals measure their performance against established criteria. At the same time, reflective practice encourages ongoing self-assessment and adaptation, allowing practitioners to learn from their own experiences and stay responsive to changing circumstances. When this reflective mindset is knowledgeable by current research, it grounds decisions in evidence rather than assumptions, promoting deeper understanding and more innovative solutions (Brookfield, 2017, NDNA, 2025).

Finally, quality in early years education is not a fixed benchmark that can be checked off and forgotten. Instead, it is an energetic, changing journey that demands ongoing reflection, learning, and adaptation from educators, caregivers, and institutions alike. This means regularly assessing what is working well and what could be improved, staying open to new research and approaches, and responding thoughtfully to the unique needs of each child. Quality grows through this continuous cycle of attention and adjustment, making sure that early learning environments remain nurturing, stimulating, and responsive as children develop and change (Brookfield, 2017, NDNA, 2025).

Reference

Alison Featherbe -The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scales Wellbeing for All in Early Years. (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.eymatters.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Alison-Featherbe-The-Sustained-Shared-Thinking-and-Emotional-Wellbeing-Scales.pdf>.

Birthto5matters.org.uk. (2017). *Attachment and the key person bibliography – Birth To 5 Matters*. [online] Available at: <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/attachment-and-the-key-person-bibliography/>.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development*. [online] Harvard University Press. Available at: <https://khoerulanwarbk.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/urie-bronfenbrenner-the-ecology-of-human-developboko-s-z1.pdf>.

Brookfield, S. (2017). *Becoming a Critically Reflected Teacher* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, [online] 2(2). Available at: <https://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/article/view/165>.

Childcarecanada.org. (2024). *Improving quality in the early years: A comparison of perspectives and measures | childcarecanada.org*. [online] Available at: <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/12/03/improving-quality-early-years-comparison-perspectives-and>.

Clarke, M. (2013). Terror/enjoyment: performativity, resistance and the teacher's psyche. *London Review of Education*, 11(3), pp.229–238.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2013.840983>.

Council for Disabled Children. (2021). *National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)*. [online] Available at: <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/work-us/membership/meet-our-members/national-day-nurseries-association-ndna>.

Curee.co.uk. (2019). *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years | Centre for the Use of Research & Evidence in Education (CUREE)*. [online] Available at: <http://www.curee.co.uk/node/4862>.

Department for Education (2024). *Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (EYFS)*. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>.

Early Years Wales. (2020). *Quality for All*. [online] Available at: <https://www.earlyyears.wales/en/quality-for-all>.

EduSkills OECD (2020). *Engaging young children: Lessons from research about quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*. [online] Slideshare. Available at: <https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/engaging-young-children-lessons-from-research-about-quality-in-early-childhood-education-and-care/92046786> [Accessed 5 Apr. 2026].

Guest (2008). *Baby Effective Early Learning Programme (beel)*. [online] The Foundation Stage Forum Ltd. Available at: <https://eyfs.info/forums/topic/12305-baby-effective-early-learning-programme-beel/> [Accessed 5 Apr. 2026].

Harms, T., Clifford, R.M. and Cryer, D. (2015). *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Kingston, D. (2023). *The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) Scale*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003379867>.

Liu, T. and Jocelyn (2025). Performer versus caring professional: identity conflicts of preschool teachers in the context of performative culture in mainland China. *Educational Review*, pp.1–18. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2025.2486755>.

Moss, P. (2016). Why can't we get beyond quality? *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 17(1), pp.8–15. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949115627895>.

Melhuish, E., Siraj, I. and Kingston, D. (2015). *Assessing Quality in early Childhood Education and Care: Sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being (SSTEW) for 2-5 year-olds provision*. [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272349364_Assessing_Quality_in_early_Childhood_Education_and_Care_Sustained_shared_thinking_and_emotional_well-being_SSTEW_for_2-5_year-olds_provision.

NDNA. (2025). *Quality Teaching in the Early Years nursery training - NDNA*. [online] Available at: <https://ndna.org.uk/face-to-face-training/quality-teaching-in-the-early-years/>.

NDNA. (n.d.). *Childcare Quality Improvement & Self Evaluation*. [online] Available at: <https://ndna.org.uk/childcare-quality-improvement-self-evaluation/>.

OECD (2018). *Engaging Young Children*. [online] OECD. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/engaging-young-children_9789264085145-en.html.

Ofsted (2023). *Education Inspection Framework*. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework/education-inspection-framework-for-september-2023>.

Piaget, J. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. [online] psycnet.apa.org. Available at: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2007-10742-000>.

Providing Quality Early Childhood Education and Care RESULTS FROM THE STARTING STRONG SURVEY 2018. (n.d.). Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/10/providing-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care_cdc64be6/301005d1-en.pdf.

Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. (n.d.). Available at: https://www.opgroeien.be/sites/default/files/documenten/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf.

Quality Counts. (2023). *Quality Counts - early years quality improvement scheme*. [online] Available at: <https://qualitycounts.org.uk/>.

Routledge & CRC Press. (n.d.). *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project*. [online] Available at: <https://www.routledge.com/Early-Childhood-Matters-Evidence-from-the-Effective-Pre-school-and-Primary-Education-Project/Sylva-Melhuish-Sammons-Siraj-Blatchford-Taggart/p/book/9780415482431>.

Schön, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner*. [online] Available at: <https://studenthublive.open.ac.uk/sites/studenthublive.open.ac.uk/files/reflective%20practitioner%20-%20schon.pdf>.

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. and Bell, D. (2002). *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years RESEARCH*. [online] Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/4650/1/RR356.pdf>.

Soni, A. (2018). Opportunities for development: the practice of supervision in early years' provision in England. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 27(1), pp.52–67. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2018.1444586>.

Starting Strong Engaging Young Children LESSonS from rESEarCh about QuaLitY in EarLY ChiLdhood EduCation and CarE. (n.d.). Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2018/03/engaging-young-children_g1g8b70c/9789264085145-en.pdf.

Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. (2017). Available at: https://icmec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/EYFS_STATUTORY_FRAMEWORK_2017.pdf.

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Iram Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, B. (2011). *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project*. [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/43982079_Early_Childhood_Matters_Evidence_from_the_Effective_Pre-School_and_Primary_Education_Project.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. [online] JSTOR. Harvard University Press. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjf9vz4>.

Walls, J. (2020). Performativity and caring in Education: Toward an ethic of reimagination. *Journal of School Leadership*, 32(3), p.105268462097206. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684620972065>.

Yew Chung Education Foundation. (2026). *The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) Scale* - Yew Chung Education Foundation. [online] Available at: <https://www.ycef.com/en/publication/the-sustained-shared-thinking-and-emotional-well-being-sstew-scale/> [Accessed 5 Apr. 2026].