

Reflection Paper

The purpose of this paper is to critically reflect and analyse methods of quality assurance. According to the Department for Education (2024), Ofsted says that quality in early years education refers to the provision of a carefully structured curriculum, delivered by knowledgeable practitioners who understand how young children learn and develop. It involves purposeful adult–child interactions, where practitioners extend children’s thinking, build on prior knowledge, and support progression through carefully structured learning experiences. High-quality provision ensures that learning is intentional rather than incidental, with particular emphasis on key areas such as language development, early mathematics, and cognitive skills.

The Department for Education (2024) also believes that the importance of high-quality early years provision is evident in its long-term effects on children’s development and future outcomes. Early education plays a crucial role in establishing strong foundations for learning, especially for children who may not receive the same level of support at home. Access to high-quality provision enables children to develop essential knowledge and skills that contribute to their educational achievement, wellbeing, and overall chances in life.

Understanding quality in early years provision requires consideration of both statutory and non-statutory approaches to quality assurance. For example, statutory frameworks such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The Department for Education (2021) states that EYFS is a statutory framework that sets out the standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to five years old. It ensures that all early year providers support children’s progress, safety and preparation for school through structured guidance and play-based learning. It establishes the minimum legal requirements that providers must meet to ensure children’s safety, learning, and development. These frameworks focus on essential aspects such as safeguarding, curriculum expectations and developmental outcomes, ensuring a consistent foundation of provision across settings (Department for Education, 2025). However, while statutory guidance defines what must be achieved, they can be limited in promoting sustained quality improvement beyond meeting regulatory standards.

In contrast, non-statutory quality assurance methods aim to enhance practice by encouraging reflection, evaluation, and professional development. Organisations such as, Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) and Early Years Wales provide additional frameworks and support mechanisms designed to raise standards within early years settings. For example, the Early Years Wales (2020) 'Quality for All' scheme emphasises the importance of reflective practice, ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement to deliver high-quality childcare experiences. Similarly, Coram PACEY (No Date) supports practitioners through training, guidance and professional resources, enabling them to develop their skills and provide high-quality care and learning opportunities for children and families.

Non-statutory quality-assurance approaches extend beyond statutory minimum standards and promote reflective, research-informed practice (Department for Education, 2026). They support practitioners to review their provision, identify development needs and make continuous improvements, strengthening professional judgement and learning (Birth to 5 Matters, 2025). Such reflective processes enhance outcomes for children, as high-quality early years provision relies on effective interactions, responsive environments and meaningful learning experiences, all central to process quality (OECD, 2021). While statutory frameworks provide a foundation, non-statutory methods play a vital role in driving ongoing improvement and supporting excellence across early years settings (BASW, 2023).

To build on this, PACEY is a professional association that supports childcare practitioners and childminders, to deliver high-quality early years provision. It provides guidance, advice, and resources to improve practice and promote positive outcomes for children and their families (Coram PACEY, 2025). In addition to this, PACEY offers a range of quality improvement tools, including professional training, reflective practice resources and best practice guidance, all of which are designed to support practitioners in developing their knowledge and skills. These resources encourage practitioners to engage in continuous professional development and to critically evaluate their own practice, which is widely recognised as a key component of high-quality early years provision (Department for Education, 2024).

One of the main strengths of PACEY's approach is that it emphasises on reflective practice, which enables practitioners to assess their strengths and identify areas for improvement. Reflective approaches have been shown to enhance professional competence and support improved outcomes for children, as practitioners are better able to respond to individual needs and adapt their provision accordingly (Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Toolkit, No Date). Furthermore, access to professional training and guidance can strengthen practitioner confidence and support greater consistency in the quality of provision across settings. Engaging in reflective and research-informed practice enables practitioners to develop their skills, make informed decisions, and enhance their professional competence over time (University of Bristol, 2025).

However, there are also limitations to PACEY in relation to quality assurance. One key limitation is that participation is voluntary, meaning not all practitioners engage with the support and guidance provided. This can lead to inconsistencies in practice across early years settings (Department for Education, 2024). In addition, accessing PACEY's training and resources may require both time and financial commitment, as some opportunities involve extended training hours, which may be challenging for practitioners or smaller settings with fewer staff (Coram PACEY, 2025). Furthermore, OECD (2021) implies that unlike statutory bodies such as Ofsted, PACEY is not externally regulated, meaning there is less formal accountability in how quality is measured and maintained. Therefore, although PACEY supports professional development and reflective practice, it may limit overall impact on ensuring consistent quality across the sector.

Whilst Coram PACEY (2025) aims to improve outcomes for children through enhancing practitioner knowledge and practice, the impact is primarily indirect and not consistently demonstrated through measurable outcomes at the level of the child. Coram PACEY (2025) highlights improvements in practitioner confidence and quality of provision. However, this evidence is often based on self-evaluation rather than measurable outcomes for children. This makes it difficult to establish a clear link between PACEY's support and sustained improvements in children's learning and development. In addition, PACEY does not consistently capture the child's voice or real-life experiences, particularly in relation to wellbeing and emotional

development. As noted by the OECD (2021), effective quality assurance should include child-centered measures, which are not fully addressed within PACEY's framework.

Furthermore, Early Years Wales (2020) is a national organisation that supports the development of high-quality childcare and early education across Wales through training, resources, and quality improvement frameworks. One of its key quality assurance initiatives is the 'Quality for All' (QfA) scheme, which is designed to support early years settings in evaluating and improving their provision through a structured and reflective process. Early Years Wales (2020) maintain that the scheme involves self-assessment, professional discussion, and observation of practice, forming an ongoing cycle of reflection, assessment, and recognition. A key strength of this approach is that it provides a clear and structured framework for improvement, enabling practitioners to identify strengths and areas for development while promoting continuous professional development. This reflects Welsh Government expectations that quality improvement should be continuous and reflective, informed by evidence, self-evaluation and stakeholder input, rather than a compliance-led process (Welsh Government, 2023).

Additionally, the accreditation element offers external recognition, which can enhance the credibility of settings and provide reassurance to parents and stakeholders. As the framework is specifically designed for Wales, it aligns closely with national priorities for early childhood development and supports consistency across Welsh settings (Public Health Wales, 2025).

However, despite these benefits, there are limitations to the QfA approach. One key concern is that structured quality assurance frameworks can become overly focused on documentation and evidencing practice, leading to a checklist-driven approach rather than meaningful improvements in children's real-life experiences. Although QfA includes reflective discussions and observations, the requirement to complete assessment tools and meet specific criteria may shift practitioner's focus on acceptance rather than authentic practice (Early Years Wales, 2020). Furthermore, Early Years Wales (2025) implies that the process can be time-consuming, which may place additional pressure on a practitioner's current workload and staffing challenges. Recent evidence highlights that early year practitioners in Wales are facing significant workforce

pressures, including recruitment difficulties and increased workload, which can impact their capacity to fully engage with quality improvement processes.

Critically, while the framework is useful in identifying areas for improvement, it may not always capture the complexity of everyday interactions or a child's experiences. This raises questions about whether such schemes reflect genuine quality in practice or primarily demonstrate formally recorded quality. Therefore, although the QfA framework provides a valuable structure for self-evaluation and development, the effectiveness ultimately depends on how meaningfully practitioners engage with the process and whether it is complemented by a more child-centered, practice-focused approach.

Both PACEY and Early Years Wales adopt non-statutory approaches to quality assurance that emphasise continuous improvement through reflective practice and professional development. PACEY supports practitioners through training, guidance, and reflective tools that encourage ongoing evaluation of practice (Coram PACEY, 2025). Similarly, Early Years Wales promotes structured self-assessment and reflection through its Quality for All framework, enabling settings to identify strengths and areas for development (Early Years Wales, 2020). A key similarity is their focus on practitioner-led evaluation, which supports informed decision-making and improvement. This reflects policy expectations within Wales that quality improvement should be continuous and evidence-informed rather than compliance-driven (Welsh Government, 2023).

PACEY and Early Years Wales both aim to support improvement but differ in their quality-assurance approaches. PACEY offers flexible, voluntary guidance, training, and resources, enabling individualised, self-directed professional development (Coram PACEY, 2025). However, Early Years Wales provides a more structured system through the Quality for All scheme, involving formal self-assessment, external recognition, and a clear progression pathway (Early Years Wales, 2020). The QfA cycle includes observation and reaccreditation, reflecting Welsh policy expectations for collaborative, evidence-based improvement (Welsh Government, 2023). Whereas PACEY's less formal model supports practitioner autonomy, aligning with research on evidence-based development enhancing independent practice (University of Bristol, 2025).

Early Years Wales (2020) Quality for All framework provides more structured and measurable insights into practice, offering external recognition and alignment with national standards. Coram PACEY (No Date) flexible, voluntary approach is more practical in day-to-day settings, allowing practitioners to engage at their own pace and focus on professional development without pressure. Though QfA's structured reflection and observation may provide a stronger potential relationship to practice improvements to children's experiences when implemented meaningfully, neither strategy entirely captures direct child-centered evidence in terms of improving children's outcomes.

Improving early years provision relies on collecting a range of both quantitative and qualitative information to build a comprehensive understanding of children's development and the effectiveness of practice. Key sources include observations of children, parental feedback, staff reflections, and assessment of developmental progress. Observations are widely recognised as central to understanding how children learn, as they capture children's interests, interactions, and engagement within everyday experiences, which are key indicators of effective practice (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

UNESCO (2026) suggests that assessment of developmental progress provides measurable data that can be used to monitor children's learning and identify areas where additional support may be needed. However, assessment should be used formatively to guide teaching rather than simply measure outcomes. In addition, parental feedback offers valuable insight into children's learning beyond the setting, supporting a more holistic view of development. Staff reflections also contribute important qualitative insights, enabling practitioners to evaluate and adapt their practice (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

Together, these methods help identify strengths in provision, such as effective interactions and supportive learning environments, as well as areas for development, including gaps in learning. However, they may not fully capture child experiences, emotional wellbeing, or cultural contexts. Therefore, a more child-centered approach that incorporates children's perspectives is essential for a deeper and more meaningful understanding of quality in early years provision.

Nesta (2024) and O'Connor *et al* (2025) believe that quality assurance methods are most effective when data is used to improve practice. In early years settings, information from observations, assessments, parental feedback and staff reflection informs decision-making and supports the development of action plans to guide improvement. These plans identify areas for development, such as improving interactions or learning environments. Education Endowment Foundation (2025) points out that targeted professional development can enhance practitioner knowledge and practice, while using research-informed approaches supports continuous improvement (University of Bristol, 2025).

However, Family (No Date) says that the effectiveness of these methods depends on how they are applied in practice, as research highlights limitations in how assessments are implemented and interpreted. There is a risk they become compliance-driven, leading to a “box-ticking” approach where observations lack critical reflection (Teach Early Years, 2026). In addition, excessive recording can shift focus away from understanding children’s development (Early Excellence, 2026). This is problematic, as quality interactions are central to children’s learning and development (OECD, 2020).

Therefore, true quality improvement is not achieved through data collection alone, but through the meaningful interpretation and application of that information. Reflective practitioners play a crucial role in this process, as they use evidence to adapt practice, respond to children’s needs, and create more effective learning experiences (North Yorkshire Council, 2017).

In conclusion, quality assurance in the early years relies on both statutory frameworks and non-statutory approaches that support continuous improvement. While statutory guidance provides essential standards, organisations such as PACEY and Early Years Wales strengthen practice through reflection, professional development and structured evaluation. Each approach has strengths and limitations; however, both highlight the importance of reflective and evidence-informed practice. Ultimately, meaningful quality improvement depends on how practitioners interpret and apply information to enhance children’s experiences, ensuring provision remains responsive, intentional, and focused on positive outcomes for all children.

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