

Cover sheet

For this assessment I have submitted the following:

Part 1 – Literature Review

Part 2 – Methodological Considerations

Part 3 – Ethical Considerations

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work.

Part 1. An exploration into staff to child ratio for children aged two and under, within the early years sector, and whether the current regulations within Early Years Wales, enable practitioners to offer quality care.

The following piece will explore research and evidence which look at staff to child ratios within Wales for babies and children aged 2, considering current regulations and whether they enable staff to provide quality care to each individual child within the setting.

Welsh Government (2023) set out the minimum standards for childcare settings to follow, which include the national minimum standards for ratio. This requires daycare settings to provide a ratio of 1 staff member to 3 children under age 2 and 1 staff member to four children for children aged 2. Along with Northern Ireland who share the same ratios as Wales, 1:3 for under 2 and 1:4 for age 2-3 (Department for health, Northern Ireland, 2012), the ideas of the devolved nations are split, as ratios in Scotland are 1:3 for under 2 and 1:5 for children aged 2 (Scottish Government, n.d.). In September 2023, changes were made to the ratio in England for children aged 2, increasing from 1:4 to 1:5 (Magloire, 2023). Holmes (n.d.) discuss the decision of Welsh Government choosing not to follow England in the changes, arguing that the current ratios in Wales give staff the ability to meet individual needs with the time and care required. This is consistent with Welsh Government (2023), who write within standard 15 of the national minimum standards, that the outcome of the staff to child ratio will benefit children as it conforms to best practice. This shows Welsh Government believe in their decision to maintain the current ratios.

When researching quality care, it could begin with the UN convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC). Article 12 of the UNCRC state, 'Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them' (UNICEF, n.d.). It can be seen how Welsh Government have taken the rights of the child into consideration within current framework. In the Quality Framework for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care in Wales set by Welsh Government (n.d.) It believes quality care is provided by an enabling adult, explaining an enabling adult is someone that is responsive and attentive to babies and young children. This is supported by McMahon and Dyer (2019) who discuss the role of the practitioner in supporting the child, explaining the practitioner should treat each child as an

individual, taking a calm approach and listening to their opinions. It can be considered from these points how time and care is needed within a busy setting to enable the practitioner to fully listen and engage with each individual child. It can also be questioned if the current ratio in Wales enable this.

Theorist John Bowlby (2005) shares his ideas of attachment and the role of the caregiver, believing the caregiver should have a supporting role within a child's exploration. He felt the adult should step back and allow the child to go off and explore, however, the adult should also be ready and responsive to the child's needs, should they need support or require help due to safety. Bowlby sees this as a key role for the caregiver, suggesting, how the caregiver responds, determines a child's future mental health (Bowlby, 2005). Bowlby's theory is supported by the findings of Mary Ainsworth, who found that babies who had a secure attachment to their mother, explored confidently, seeing their mother as a secure base (Bretherton, 1992). This shows how the caregiver can potentially impact development of children and links to Welsh Government (n.d.) framework, as mentioned above, outlining the enabling adult.

If quality care is, as already discussed, being an enabling adult. It can be questioned how staff are able to offer personal, individual care when challenged with other factors, such as snack time and nappy changing. Butt *et al.* (2022) discuss research by (Haux et al, 2022) into increases in ratio being considered in England. It shares the concerns of providers who want to offer quality care but feel changes in ratio would affect this, particularly for new children who need extra support with feeding and changing. Concerns were also mentioned for children with undiagnosed additional needs.

Following the changes England made to ratios 2023, Fazackerley (2024) reported the findings of researchers at Northampton and Nottingham Trent universities (n.d.) who found, out of 152 early years settings, 32% who were following the new ratio, felt the quality of care had been affected with staff saying they felt they were "simply firefighting" and mentioned concerns for safety. These findings could suggest the higher ratio not only lacks quality care, but also poses risk to children. It can be argued that the research carried out is small and the detail of the research discussed

in the article is lacking, however, it gives an insight into the experiences of some childcare practitioners at that time.

A review by Dalgaard *et al.* (2022) into adult/child ratio and the development of children, found in one specification, an increased quality of interaction with a ratio of less children per adult. However, the studies that took place were small and did not include children under the age of two. The article goes on to advise caution with the findings as the quality of the studies looked at were low. It states there is 'urgent need for more contemporary high-quality research exploring the effects of changes in adult/child ratio and group size in ECEC on measures of process quality and child developmental and socio-emotional outcomes' (Dalgaard *et al.*, 2022).

As shown through this piece, there is some evidence regarding ratio and quality care within the Early Years, however, it is more England based which seems partly due to England's decision to increase ratios in 2023. As mentioned, Welsh Government framework shows links to attachment theory by Bowlby (2005), suggesting quality care. Though Welsh Government (2023) claim the current ratios show best practice, there is little evidence to show the impacts on staff to child ratio within Wales and whether staff feel they are able to provide the quality, individual care that is talked about within this piece.

Part 1 - References

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Part 2. Methodological Considerations

This section will look at, how the research into staff ratio and its effects on quality care will be conducted and evaluate the chosen methods.

Firstly, the researcher will need to consider who will be required to take part. As the question links to ratio within Early Years in Wales, it is clear that the research should take place within Early Years settings in Wales. When measuring quality care the researcher will need to reflect back on the literature review, questioning whether staff are able to be an 'enabling adult' as stated by Welsh Government in the 'Quality Framework for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care in Wales' (n.d.). The researcher will need to look at the responsiveness to children's needs, and the reactions of the children. This will require the researcher to involve childcare practitioners and the children within their care.

As staff and children within early years settings are required for the research, the researcher could use convenience sampling by conducting their research through their workplace. Cohen (2017) say that convenience sampling allows the researcher to choose a group for research purposes that are easily accessible, going on to explain, convenience sampling may be useful for a small case study as the research would only apply to one setting and the one group studied within it. This could be beneficial to the researcher as it may save time in finding a suitable setting for the research, though the researcher will only be able to refer back this one setting and not all the settings in Wales. The researcher will need to consider their relationship with staff in the setting and record accurately. Newby (2014) discusses the challenges to being neutral, saying it requires the researcher to control their own feelings and record with honesty, saying the researcher will have to put aside their own values. If research shows there is risk or another alternative then it is up to the researcher to make the setting aware of this. For example, the researcher may witness a work colleague put a child at risk. The researcher should not allow their relationship with the staff member influence whether or not they report the incident Newby (2014).

Cross sectional study is an observational method of study which requires the researcher to observe without changing anything within the environment (Institute for

Work & Health, 2015). Cross sectional study will be beneficial for the research project as it will enable the researcher to observe the children and staff within the early years setting, running on the current recommended ratios in Wales. This will show natural running of the session. However, Longitudinal study may be more beneficial to the researcher as the observations will run over a period of time, this could be months or years. This is beneficial as it gives a broader picture than cross sectional study that only shows a moment in time (Institute for Work & Health, 2015). With this considered, longitudinal study will allow the researcher to observe different intakes of children throughout the study, seeing if ratio numbers impact staff and children differently depending on the behaviours and needs of children.

According to *Clark et al.* (2003 cited Harcourt *et al.*, 2011), observation is the 'foundational' method for listening and understanding children and babies thoughts and feelings, particularly for those who yet able to communicate in more complex ways. From this it can be seen how observation will support the research of quality care, this is supported by Welsh Government (n.d.) who champion observation in practice within the early years. Within the assessment guidance for early years (n.d.) It states that observation allows the adult to gain a full understanding of the child, by following their lead and giving the child the opportunity to make their own choices. The researcher should take this guidance into consideration when observing , understanding not to interfere . From this, the researcher will be able to observe the children's responses to care from the staff within the setting in an authentic way. This will enable the child to have a voice within the research.

It can be seen how observation will be a useful research method in order to see how children react to their care within the current ratios. It could, however, have its challenges, such as the Hawthorn Effect. The Hawthorn effect was discovered accidentally during research in Hawthorns Work Factory (1920s-30's). The research was to see if the factory environment, such as lighting, effected productivity but instead researchers found workers changed their behaviour due to being studied (Oswald *et al.* 2014). It is suggested that a way to avoid the Hawthorn effect is for the researcher to spend time, and get to know the group they will be conducting the research on. Oswald *et al.* (2014) goes on to share the value of researcher building positive relationships with the group, saying that findings will be richer and more detailed with people who feel comfortable and relaxed. The value of the researcher

conducting their observations within their work setting can be seen, as they have already built a relationship with the staff and children they are observing. The researcher could be able to recognise familiar behaviours and have an understanding of the individuals they are observing.

Another way to potentially combat the Hawthorn Effect would be to use more than one research method. Triangulation allows the researcher to combine different types of research in order to gain better understanding of their findings. It can be seen as more accurate than just producing one form of research (Roberts-Holmes, 2018). By combining interviews or questionnaires with observation it could potentially add value to the findings of the research. This idea is supported by Denzin (1989, cited in Louis, 2017) who suggests to achieve validity of research, triangulation will show the research as more trustworthy. As mentioned, the research project is one case study based in one setting. This could be enhanced by using multiple methods of research, potentially increasing the validity of the research.

To support observations, interviews with the practitioners within the setting could give an insight into their thoughts and feelings of the current ratios in Wales. Nolan (2013), share the uses of conversational interviews, discussing how they enable the researcher to gain a personal insight into the feelings and experiences of the person being interviewed. Walker and Solvason (2014), discuss how structured interviews enable the researcher to ask a set of questions, that are planned, to each participant. This allows the researcher to compare answers with ease. Nolan (2013) considers semi- structured interviews as a way of working in partnership. The interview begins with structured questions, however the interview may change direction as the researcher and participant get deeper into the subject. Although, the answers may be easier to determine through set questions, a semi-structured interview may be more suited to the research question in order to gain an in depth understanding of the challenges practitioners may face when trying to provide quality care to children within the ratio. Walker and Solvason (2014) look at the challenges of interviews, suggesting there may be potential bias if the researcher is carrying out their study within their own workplace, going on to say, the researcher would need to conduct the interviews in an ethical manner in order to avoid this. Jacobson (1998, cited in Walker and Solvason, 2014), recommends the researcher is honest in their findings, making it clear to the reader that there is risk of potential of bias, but use their values

as a childcare professional to support the authenticity of the research. To add value to the research, the researcher could consider using questionnaires. Hammond and Wellington (2020) suggest that time is taken by researchers to plan and produce a survey in order to achieve the data required, going on to advise questionnaires as a reliable way of gathering information, particularly if repeated with the same people over a period of time. The text by Hammond and Wellington (2020) does suggest, however, when filling in written questionnaires, the participants may not be as detailed in their responses as they rush to complete them. Hopkins (2014) supports the idea of questionnaires being valuable for specific answers to specific questions. Due to these factors, this may not be a valuable method for the researcher as it will lack the detail and depth the researcher is hoping to achieve.

From this discussion it can be seen that triangulation will be beneficial to the researcher in order to validate the findings of the research. By using observations, the researcher will be able to gain a natural insight into the daily care of children aged 2 and under, observing the children's responses to care from practitioners within the setting. By supporting observation with interviews, the researcher will be able to gain a more in depth understanding of the thoughts and feelings of the staff within the setting and whether they feel they are able to offer quality care within the current ratios set by Welsh Government minimum standards. By completing the research through longitudinal study, the researcher can observe children and staff within the setting, during busier and quieter times but also through different times of the year, when new intakes of children may affect the dynamics of the setting.

Part 2 - References

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Part 3. Ethical Considerations

When carrying out research, the researcher should show humanity and dignity to their participants. This will also show to the reader, the research is honest and has moral compass (Taquette and Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). This section will consider the ethical issues that may arise when conducting the research. It will look at how the researcher will gain consent and also look at the collection of data.

Initial application for consent will be with the gatekeeper of the study, the nursery manager. Flewitt (2005) considers the risk of including the gatekeeper and the parent, suggesting that request for consent for research may effect early relationships, as the parent may agree to consent to please the manager and staff within the setting. This could be true in some cases, however, as the researcher is conducting their research within their place of work, the researcher will have already developed a trusting relationship with the parents and guardians.

As mentioned in section one, Article 12 of the UNCRC state, 'Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them' (UNICEF, n.d.). this shows that the child should be the focus when considering their consent and participation within the research. As the children within the research will be children aged two and under, the researcher will be required to gain consent from the parent or guardian. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2021) say, children must consent to taking part within the research, along with consent from the parent or guardian. It explains, when gaining consent, the participant should be fully aware of the research that is taking place and what it entails. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2021) say the participant should be able to withdraw at any time, with signs that a child is unhappy or unwilling being recognised and respected as a signal to opt out. By observing and responding to the children's needs during the study, this will support the legal rights of the child, as stated above, within The UNCRC (n.d.)

Along with consent, comes the risk of putting young children in a situation they do not want to be in. ERIC (n.d.) agrees with The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2021), that consent is required from the parent or caregiver for young children, however they discuss, even though it is expected that

parents support their child's best interests, this is not always the case. The example is given of a parent refusing to consent due to fears of the child disclosing information about abuse. The 'opt out' idea is suggested to allow the researcher to avoid the consent requirement (ERIC (n.d.). Alderson (1995, cited in ERIC, n.d.), challenges the ideas of Ethics committees who feel opt in is the appropriate method, believing that young children lose their voice to the decision of the adult. It is suggested by some researchers that children are unable to consent and refer to this as 'assent', however, it is argued that competent children under age 16 are able to give valid consent (Flewitt, 2005). This can be seen as a valid point, however, it can be questioned if a child aged two and under can give full consent when they are unable to fully understand the idea of the research. With this considered, it shows how observing the children and their wellbeing throughout the study is key, and even if the parent has given consent, the wishes of the children take priority. Palaiologou (2012) say the researcher should be aware of body language or non-verbal cues to indicate the child no longer wants to participate. For the researcher involved, as they work in the setting, they will be familiar with the cues of the children they work with, this could mitigate risk of a child becoming distressed from the study.

Observing through film and photographs could be a useful tool for the researcher to look back on however, Flewitt, R. (2005) talk about the experience of both parents and staff expressing feelings of anxiousness at the thought of being filmed. This could also raise ethical concerns for looked after children. NSPCC Learning (2025) state that if safe protocols are not implemented this could put vulnerable children at risk of being recognised by a person that abused them. Flewitt, R. (2005) explains how the researcher could consider how much visual detail is needed and could consider blurring the faces of the participants to avoid staff and parents feeling uncomfortable. NSPCC Learning (2025) agree with this point, saying that these risks can be avoided if safe protocols are put in place, going on to suggest, creating a written photography and film policy for parents, staff and volunteers to understand. The document should include detailed information on how the photos will be used and where they will be shown. The researcher could consider providing parents and carers with consent forms to sign to agree on the terms of how the images will be used. Also, The University of Wales Trinity Saint David (2022), views the recording

and use of cameras as a high ethical risk. This would require the researcher to submit an application for ethical approval.

Anonymity may be a challenge for staff within the setting when documenting the research. BERA (2024) state, in small groups and communities it can be difficult to maintain confidentiality, particularly when word is spread around the area. If staff were to open up about concerns of ratio within the setting this could potentially cause tension within their community and job role, putting their job at risk. As anonymity may be hard to keep, the researcher should make clear to the participants the risks may cause (Barnard *et al.*, 2012). The researcher may also need consider opening out the interviews to more than one setting, in order to keep anonymity for the staff involved.

When conducting interviews, there may be times where the participant may feel upset or uncomfortable when discussing sensitive issues. Barnard *et al.* (2012) discusses, even though the participant is upset, that does not mean the research cannot go ahead, however, the researcher should ensure the participant is happy to go on with the interview. To mitigate this risk, the researcher could inform the participant before the interview of the questions that will be asked, in order to prepare them. Taquette and Borges da Matta Souza (2022) talk about the complexity of the researcher being familiar with the participant, stating that the researcher may swap into the role of a therapist or friend. The interview process may also be upsetting for the researcher, particularly because they know the practitioners they are interviewing. Cohen (2017) argue, some say it is a reasonable response for the researcher to show their emotions within the interview, though others suggest the researcher should keep their feelings to themselves until the participant has left. Cohen (2017), suggest the researcher can feel emotionally exhausted from conducting emotionally strong interviews. BERA (2024) state that there should be protection for the safety of the researcher, this includes the provision of specialist training by the employers or sponsors. It also mentions the responsibility of the employer or sponsor to provide an ethics of care which includes self-care.

the researcher will need to complete ethical clearance forms which enables the researcher to consider their ethical practice before they begin. This will enable the researcher to talk with their tutor to gain support and advice (Walker and Solvason,

2014). As mentioned above, this support will help the researcher to conduct themselves and the research in the correct manner. University of Wales Trinity Saint David (2022, p.3) have a Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice which states "UWTSD and its researchers are expected to maintain the highest ethical standards and to foster values of honesty, rigour, openness, care and respect".

BERA (2024) say that universities whom collaborate with the researcher have a responsibility to ensure appropriate code of conduct. It sees the researcher and the university as joint partners within the research. As this is the case, the researcher will need to ensure they adhere to the university code of conduct, as if ethics are not followed, they are not only putting themselves at disrepute but also the University. This is supported by Waters (2024) who suggest the researcher should maintain professionalism as they are representing the university, therefore it is their responsibility to make sure that everyone involved in the research is treated fairly and respectfully, also discussing that research is maintained in the correct way.

BERA (2024) discusses data protection, referring to the data protection act (2018), stating that the researcher should ensure that they have all participants permission to gather and store their personal information. The information should be kept no longer than is necessary for the research (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2022). It is stated within the Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2022), that the researcher has a duty of care to report any safeguarding concerns to the relative person. This is agreed by (BERA, 2024) who say, if the researcher feels someone may be at risk they are able to break confidentiality, though the participant should be made aware of this when agreeing to participate within the research. This could be a challenging time for the researcher as they are familiar with all involved within the setting, so reporting may feel difficult. As mentioned above, support from the university or employer may be needed to support the researcher through the emotions of this.

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