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Leadership and management for systems of quality portfolio

AI Statement

I acknowledge the use of CHATGPT.com on 5th April 2026, using the prompt “please help me to make word count by expanding on my conclusion using my own words” I used some of the suggestions, rewriting them into my own words.

I acknowledge the use of CHATGPT.com on 5th April 2026, using the prompt “please compare and contrast the two methods I have written about”. From this, I used some of the suggestions written into my own words.

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

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Reflective Paper

Introduction

This paper aims to explore the concept of quality in Early Years Education and Care and scrutinise why it is important in promoting and ensuring quality beyond statutory requirements. It will reflect on the complexity of defining quality, acknowledging the range of factors that influence practice. The paper will then evaluate two methods developed to assess and enhance quality, highlighting both their strengths and limitations in practice.

What is Quality in Early Years Education and Care, and Why is it important?

Many researchers agree that quality in early years education is a multidimensional concept that is difficult to define within a single construct (Birth to 5 Matters, 2025; Palaiologou, 2023; Eadie, *et al.*, 2022; Edwards, 2021 and Moss, 2016). Collectively, they agree that the main elements of quality can be categorised into two areas: process quality, which refers to daily interactions of the children and adults within their Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings and the experiences children are exposed to through the curriculum and practice such as the physical and emotional care they receive (Edwards, 2021), and structural quality which relates to the environment, leadership and management elements of the settings, including staff qualifications, adult to child ratios and health and safety arrangements (Palaiologou, 2023; Slot, 2018). Furthermore, Eadie, *et al.*, (2022) propose a third area that interconnects with defining quality, system quality, which refers to the broader system of national and governmental bodies that regulate the early years standards, for instance, inspection frameworks, policies and national curriculum. This highlights the complexity of defining quality, as it is shaped by a multitude of interrelated factors.

There is a strong connection between high-quality early years education and the quality of future academic outcomes, as well as long-term success (Best Start in Life, 2025). Each setting is unique, with variations in funding, location, staff, children and their families (Rudoe, 2020). Despite these differences, Birth to 5 Matters (2021) says settings should give equal consideration to the elements that shape their environment to achieve the best outcomes for their children. However, research by Antje von Suchodoletz *et al.* (2023) shows that differences in settings result in varied

levels of quality; for example, settings with smaller child-to-adult ratios were reported to have higher-quality care compared to those with larger class numbers; practitioners who had more time to offer provided more opportunities for quality interactions. Similarly, practitioners with sufficient training and emotional support were more able to emotionally support children with behavioural problems. Overall, these cases support the view that children's outcomes are dependent on high-quality care (Antje von Suchodoletz *et al.*, 2023).

Department for Education (2025) recognises the impact practitioners have on educating and caring for young children and how the quality of their care influences their future quality of life. Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) has developed guidance that promotes a consistent approach in providing high-quality care. This framework is aimed at practitioners to guide their practice in providing quality care. It says that practitioners should understand the importance of child development, building secure attachments to support well-being, and help create environments that challenge children and promote their holistic development (Welsh Government, 2023). Hayes, *et al.* (2025) say that observation is the first step to effectively reflect on practice. Observation allows practitioners to assess the level of a child's progress compared to the level of learning and development (Hayes, 2023). Through reflective practice, practitioners should continually evaluate their practice, identify areas for improvement and, where needed, build on knowledge with effective training (Thompson and Thompson, 2014; Early Years Wales, 2019). On the contrary, frameworks such as Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education, 2021) and the non-statutory Development matters revised edition (Department for Education, 2023) often highlight the need to assess children's development; however, observations that inform assessment is given little attention, highlighting how guidance is open for misinterpretation (Hayes, 2023). Similarly, the National Children's Bureau (2024) highlights the importance of reflective practice focusing on assessment but provides limited guidance on how practitioners should engage in reflection, such as through observation. The absence of clear guidance may make it challenging for practitioners to remain consistent in reflecting on the quality of their practice.

Furthermore, McMahon and Dyer (2019) suggest that knowledgeable professionals understand the importance of high-quality observations and use them to

meaningfully assess their practice in supporting child development. Welsh Government (2025) emphasises the importance of qualified staff in early years settings to ensure high-quality care and education. However, research by Haux, et al. (2022) reports the ongoing challenges with staff retention, mainly due to low pay in comparison to the high expectations placed on practitioners. Additionally, Hayes, *et al.* (2025) agree that the working conditions within early education are often demanding, with high staff-to-child ratios and extensive administrative responsibilities frequently requiring staff to work out of paid hours to meet the demands of providing a quality service. These factors can negatively impact job satisfaction, often leading practitioners to seek employment in a less stressful working environment, often with a higher level of pay (Cameron and Moss, 2020). Finally, it is important for families to feel confident that their child is receiving high-quality care (Best Start, 2025). Parental satisfaction is influenced by the quality of educational service,

A range of methods has been developed to help practitioners measure and assure quality within their settings. This essay will critically evaluate two methods. Firstly, the Leuven scale of involvement, a concept created by Ferre Laevers in the 1980s, is still widely recognised and used as an observational tool for measuring quality in early years settings (MacRae and Jones, 2023). The tool focuses on two core measures of quality early years education, children's well-being and their involvement in chosen activity. The scale indicates levels from one to five, one indicating the lowest level of involvement and five being the highest. These levels are identified by observing children's movement, especially eye movement, their facial expressions and the length of time spent engaged in an activity (Woods, 2016). Brodie (2025) suggests that children are more likely to be occupied in deep-level learning when participating in activities that they enjoy. However, there are limitations to using observational tools such as the Leuven scale. For example when someone is aware they are being observed, their natural behaviours may change meaning observations may not always reflect an authentic representation of the measure (Mackinder, 2017). The Welsh Government (2023) place a strong emphasis on children's well-being, recognising its influence in development. Practitioners who support children's emotional well-being from an early age help to develop life-long emotional resilience and self-regulation skills (NDNA, 2024).

However, Lewis (2020) argues that the scale implies that unless a child is reaching levels four and five in well-being, the scale indicates that learning may be limited. That being said, levels of well-being and involvement can fluctuate throughout the day, showing how the tool has limitations in providing accurate results.

The second method chosen for evaluation is the Sustained Share Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) scales. This is a more modern observational tool designed to assess the quality of interactions between practitioners and children, as well as how children's emotional well-being is being supported (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). Research by the World Health Organization (2025) suggests that positive social connections are linked with improved health, educational and future outcomes. Conversely, those who experience social isolation may find it more challenging to recover later in life, leading to detrimental long-term effects on well-being if unaddressed early on in life. Furthermore, research indicates that in a world surrounded by online social connections, the use of digital devices is having an opposite effect on social engagement (World Health Organization, 2025; Al-Zu'bi, M.A.A. et al., 2025). Studies suggest that the earlier digital devices are introduced, the more difficulty children may have in interacting and engaging with others. This highlights the important role of practitioners in preventing these negative effects by promoting peer interactions and modelling positive social behaviours (Al-Zu'bi, M.A.A. et al., 2025).

Featherbe (2020) argues that quality in early years education cannot be measured solely by engagement in physical resources; rather, it is driven by meaningful interactions between two or more people. Quality is reflected when practitioners and children engage in problem-solving through rich language that is respectful and reciprocal, enabling deep learning to take place. The SSTEWS scales can therefore be used to assess the level of high-quality interactions, as well as to identify areas for improvement in practice. Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) recommend that practitioners undertake appropriate training before implementing the SSTEWS scales in practice. This is because effective use of the tool requires a high level of understanding in early years pedagogy so that observations are meaningful and the next steps are assessed effectively. Highlighting the importance of a knowledgeable and qualified practitioner having a direct influence on quality within the setting. However, this also presents a limitation of the SSTEWS scales, as not all settings

have appropriately qualified staff, meaning those who are underqualified may have difficulty using the tool effectively in practice (Argile, 2025). Social Mobility Commission (2020) states that although some early years settings are offering high-quality training in line with the National Minimum Standards of continuous professional development, research indicates that such training is not consistently adequate across all settings.

Comparison of developmental methods

Both the Leuven Scale of Involvement and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) Scale are observational tools used to assess quality in early years settings. There are key differences in what they focus on and how they are applied to practice. The Leuven Scale measures children's well-being and engagement in activities by observing behaviours (Woods, 2016; MacRae and Jones, 2023). In contrast, the SSTEW scales assess the quality of interactions between practitioners and children, emphasising emotional well-being and collaborative critical thinking (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023; Featherbe, 2020). Both tools rely on practitioner competence to support quality outcomes, highlighting the importance of reflective practice and effective staff training to support quality outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, quality in Early Years Education and Care is a multidimensional concept encompassing process, structural and system-level factors, with practitioners playing a central role in shaping the quality of provision. Through high-quality interactions and careful observation, children are more likely to achieve positive developmental and educational outcomes. However, ongoing challenges, such as recruitment and retention of qualified staff, continue to present barriers to consistently delivering high-quality care. Developmental tools, such as the Leuven Scale of Involvement and the SSTEW scales, offer valuable frameworks for assessing and enhancing quality by providing insights into children's well-being and engagement levels. The effectiveness of these tools, however, relies on practitioner competence, adequate training and reflective practice. Ultimately, ensuring high-quality early years provision requires a combination of factors from the process, structural and system levels; however, its success is heavily dependent on the skills,

knowledge and reflective practice of practitioners as well as their access to adequate training and support.

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