

This essay will critically reflect on the benefits of additional methods for promoting and ensuring quality above statutory requirements as well as analyze various methods of quality assurance with a focus on two specific types.

Cusick and Georgieff (2016) and Likhar *et al* (2022), recognize the first two years of a child's life to be significant for the development of the brain's structure and circuits which lead to language, cognitive, and social abilities. All of which influence later life outcomes.

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education project (EPPSE), was created to investigate the influence of pre-school on children's academic and social-behavioural outcomes and found that pre-school influenced secondary school performance. Children who attended high-quality preschool had higher attainment (Department for Education, 2015). The identification of this critical period has encouraged the need for high-quality provisions throughout Wales. The ECPLC Quality Framework for Wales describes quality in early years as a practice that abides by all children's rights, supports children's holistic development, engages in reflective practice, and implements professional development (Welsh Government, 2023a). This is further supported by Pianta *et al* (2016), who state that quality in early childhood education involves various factors including curriculum, teaching qualifications, classroom environment, and children's experiences.

To further delve into these topics, one of the foundations for promoting and ensuring quality in the early years is the practitioners' knowledge, skills, and qualifications. Research by Lin and Magnuson (2018) shows that practitioners who lack early childhood education training exhibited lower levels of overall classroom quality and interactions with children compared to educated practitioners. This is further supported by Sancar *et al* (2021), who states that professional development is crucial for quality provision and improving student outcomes. Programmes such as Effective Early Learning (EEL) emphasise the need to move beyond baseline national standards and support practitioners with self-evaluation and improvement (CREC, No date). However, Sims and Waniganayake (2015), state that practitioners need to believe in themselves as educational leaders to positively impact quality.

It is also significant for practitioners to continue to develop their skills and knowledge. According to the Care Council for Wales (2016), continual professional development (CPD) is essential for keeping pace with evolving research, best practices, and regulatory changes in the field of early childhood education. Engaging in CPD activities such as workshops, seminars, and online courses enables practitioners to enhance their knowledge and refine their skills.

Similarly, Being a reflective practitioner is fundamental for promoting quality in ECEC settings. Reflective practice involves critically evaluating one's actions, decisions, and interactions to enhance effectiveness and improve outcomes for children (PACEY, 2016). This is supported by Brock (2015), who states that critical reflection promotes change in practice and develops effective quality provision that meets children's needs. The New Curriculum for Wales also highlights the significance of quality improvement and reflective practice for ensuring high-quality provision (Welsh Government, 2023b).

Furthermore, the physical environment plays a pivotal role in promoting quality in early years settings. According to the Welsh Government (2023c), well-designed and stimulating classroom environments support children's engagement, exploration, and learning experiences. The emotional climate as well as the physical space should be considered, giving children a space to express themselves freely. This is supported by theorists such as Maria Montessori, who emphasized the importance of creating prepared environments that facilitate children's independence, creativity, and curiosity (Montessori Academy, No date). Pascal and Bertram (2018) also emphasise the need for an inclusive and diverse environment to promote quality in the early years. Settings should respect differences of race, gender, religion, disability and other additional learning. Unlu (2017), states that inclusivity in the classroom can be promoted by respecting children's individuality, considering backgrounds and curricula and adapting to the specific needs of children.

Another method of promoting and ensuring quality above statutory requirements is obtaining effective partnerships with parents. Research published by Cottle and Alexander (2014) found that good parent partnerships influenced quality in the early years. This is because collaborating with parents as valued partners in their children's education enhances communication, trust, and mutual respect. This is supported by Kambouri *et al* (2021), who found that parents play a crucial role in their education. Settings that successfully maintained parent partnerships had mutual trust, respect and commitment to improving learning outcomes for children. As a result, this follows the Un Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 3 which states that the best interest of the child should be prioritised (UNICEF, 2019).

According to Sims and Waniganayake (2015), children who experience high-quality provisions are mentally and physically healthier and more productive during adulthood. This is supported by research published by Bakken *et al* (2017), which found that children who attend high-quality

early childhood provisions demonstrate greater long-term success than children who lack access to a high-quality setting.

As well as this, well-renowned theorists such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Erik Erikson highlight the importance of early experiences in shaping children's cognitive and socio-emotional development (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years 2016). Piaget's theory of cognitive development emphasizes the significance of active exploration and interaction with the environment in constructing knowledge and understanding (Lefa, 2014). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights the role of social interactions in cognitive development, suggesting that quality interactions with peers and adults facilitate learning and problem-solving skills (Barnett, 2019). Erkinson's psychosocial theory underscores the importance of establishing trust, autonomy, and initiative during the early years (Knight, 2017).

Quality assurance in early childhood education and care settings is essential for ensuring optimal outcomes for children's development and well-being (Care Inspectorate, 2022). While statutory requirements establish minimum standards, additional methods play a crucial role in improving and expanding quality.

Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS), and the quality assurance scheme developed by the National Day Nurseries Association, are two prominent methods used to enhance quality in ECEC settings. While both aim to promote quality provision, they differ in their approach.

The Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) is a standardized assessment tool used to evaluate the quality of early childhood environments specifically designed for infants and toddlers. The ITERS were developed by Thelma Harms, Richard Clifford and Debby Cryer (ECERSUK, No date) and consists of seven subscales space and furnishings, personal care routines, listening and talking, activities, interaction, program structure, and parents and staff (ERSI, No date).

The NDNA quality scheme supports and improves the quality of early years provision in childcare settings. It offers guidance, resources, and assessment tools to early years practitioners, emphasizing continuous improvement through self-assessment, action planning, and professional development (NDNA, 2024a).

Moreover, while both methods offer several advantages, they also present limitations and considerations for critical analysis. One notable strength of the ITERS is that it offers a

standardized and reliable method for assessing quality in the early years. This is due to it being objective. It can be used as a useful tool to evaluate the effectiveness of approaches and curricula (Kellaghan *et al*, 2012) and (Moore *et al*, 2005). This is further supported by Kubiszyn and Borich (2023), who state that standardized testing is reliable due to the consistency of the scoring.

However, research by Paro *et al* (2014), shows that despite efforts to provide clear guidelines and criteria, the assessment process in the ITERS may still be subject to interpretation and subjectivity. Ratings and judgments may vary depending on individual perspectives, biases, and levels of expertise, potentially compromising the consistency and fairness of evaluations.

Additionally, another strength of ITERS is that its development is grounded in research on early childhood development and best practices in infant-toddler care. The scale incorporates evidence-based principles and recommendations, ensuring alignment with current knowledge and understanding of quality provision for infants and toddlers (ERS, no date).

In comparison, the NDNA developed their strategies by working closely with the Welsh government and other agencies. This collaboration ensures active participation in policy discussions and decision-making processes related to childcare issues in Wales. This enhances the credibility and relevance of the NDNA's work (NDNA, No date).

Another strength of the NDNA is that it includes several free training courses. As stated by Priestley (2023), provisions in the UK are in a cost crisis with inflation. This lack of funding can be a barrier to staff training and qualifications. This is supported by Westen (2017) who stated 600 schools have had to remove their budget for professional development. With access to free courses from the NDNA, provisions can continue with their professional development ensuring the highest quality standards.

Furthermore, the ITERS and NDNA quality schemes differ in their methodology. While the assessment process in ITERS involves on-site observations conducted by trained assessors (ERSI, No date), the NDNA Quality scheme incorporates self-assessment, action planning, and professional development activities, empowering practitioners to evaluate and improve their own practice with guidance and resources provided by the scheme (NDNA, 2024b). This can be seen as a limitation as self-assessment can be time-consuming (Sharma *et al*, 2016).

To improve provision, various types of information are essential for continuous quality improvement including assessment data. Data on current strengths and areas for improvement

within the provision are crucial. This could include observations of interactions, learning environments, and curriculum implementation (Becker *et al*, 2023). Also, feedback from parents, children and other stakeholders offers valuable insights into their experiences. This feedback can inform decision-making and improvement efforts. This can be done through parent questionnaires. Study shows that parents appreciate the opportunity to share their observations and feelings (Birbili and Tzioga, 2013).

Finally, access to research findings, evidence-based practices, and professional development opportunities keeps practitioners informed about effective strategies and approaches for enhancing quality provision (EEF, 2023).

Both the ITERS and NDNA quality schemes provide valuable information to improve provision. Through structured observations and assessments, the ITERS offers insights into various aspects of the early childhood environment, including space, interactions and programming ((ERSI, No date). The NDNA quality scheme facilitates self-assessment, action planning, and professional development. Allowing settings to identify strengths and weaknesses, gather feedback, and access resources and support to enhance provision (NDNA, 2024a).

However, while the ITERS and NDNA quality schemes offer valuable information, there are some limitations. ITERS may not capture the full complexity of social-emotional interactions or the context of the environment. Children could feel anxious or unwell, which will influence the outcome (GL Education, No date).

In conclusion, this essay has highlighted the critical importance of additional methods for promoting and ensuring quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings beyond statutory requirements. By analysing various methods of quality assurance such as the Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) and the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Quality Scheme, the significance of staff qualifications, training, reflective practice, supportive environments, and collaborative partnerships with parents and stakeholders have been recognised.

The early years represent a crucial period for children's development, as recognised by scholars like Cusick and Georgieff (2016) and Likhar et al (2022). Quality provision during this time significantly influences children's academic, social, and emotional outcomes, as evidenced by research such as the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education project (EPPSE) (Department for Education, 2015). The ECPLC Quality Framework for Wales and theoretical perspectives

from scholars like Piaget, Vygotsky, and Erikson further emphasise the importance of high-quality early childhood experiences (Welsh Government, 2023a).

Utilising tools like the ITERS and NDNA Quality Scheme, ECEC settings can enhance their capacity for continuous improvement and provide nurturing environments that support children's holistic development. These approaches will be crucial for advancing quality provision in the early years.

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