

'Quality' is a word that is subjective and has different interpretations in the Early Years Education. However, some definitions of quality can be agreed upon. Academic sources regarding Early Childhood Settings usually refer to process quality (sensitive interactions) and structural quality (regulated inputs), as essential to creating safe and stable learning environments, thereby underpinning positive developmental and learning outcomes (OECD, 2018; cited by Birth to 5 Matters, 2025). These experiences shape the way in which we deliver our curriculum for children, with process quality at its core (Eadie *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, the REPEY research suggested that effective, relational pedagogy is embedded in strong relationships between professionals and students. More 'excellent' settings identified opportunities where they could have made better use of 'sustained shared thinking' to encourage positive, child-initiated interactions. Additionally, these settings successfully integrated both adult-led and child-led activities within their environments. They cultivated a pedagogical framework whereby children were allowed to imitate activities and lead them independently, with little or no support from professionals. We know that higher quality provision has a longer, longer lasting effect on children (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). This essay will critically evaluate methods of assuring the highest possible quality of children's care or development, with links to statutory requirements and leadership roles.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is a comprehensive scale used to measure both the 'environmental provisions and teacher-led interactions' which impacts children's developmental needs - including cognitive, social, physical, emotional, and health and safety - from ages 3 to 5 (ERSI, 2025). Whereas, the Early Years Wales is a leading Welsh charity supporting a range of services to the Early Years Sector within Wales. They focus on the development, education, and care of children from the start of their lives. Providing high-quality support to everyone and placing accredited quality schemes in Wales (Early Years Wales, 2025).

Both ECERS and the Early Years Wales share a common theme - that is, promoting high-quality, holistic development and nurturing safe and stable environments. For example, Aplys and Hernandez-Torranto (2026), in their report highlighted that ECERS is effective at sustaining quality and fostering safe spaces where children's voices are being heard of. Through its impact may be generally seen as modest, it contributes substantially when it's used alongside other, more interactive focussed measures. They reviewed 154 articles, as part of their research methods. Through these observations, Aplys and Hernandez-Torranto showed that ECERS enhances children's outcomes by focusing on process quality, including supportive child-staff interactions, stimulating learning activities, and enabling professional growth (Early *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, the ECERC reflects on areas of learning and experience -

such as Literacy, and Maths - allowing us to give an in-depth exploration into how the curriculum is delivered in schools (Kathy, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart, 2008). Whilst so, this research lacks evidence regarding the cultural and geographical factors that influence ECERC's effectiveness, limiting its ability to provide a holistic view of what 'quality' looks like for different settings.

Similarly, the Early Years Wales works extensively with the Welsh Government to realise some of their objectives, such as enabling compliance with their new framework: 'Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC)' (Welsh Government, 2024). They enhance childcare quality through the 'Quality for All' accreditation. The QfA is expected to take at least 6-8 months to complete all three sections. Structural quality is embedded in the first (staff recruitment) and second (health and well-being) sections, whilst process quality is foregrounded in the third section addressing children's play and development (Early Years Wales, 2026). These sections are inextricably linked to the four core themes in the Care and Inspectorate Wales, those being; well-being, care and development, environment, and leadership and management (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025). This is also related to the *National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for Children up to the age of 12 years* (Welsh Government, 2023), as they submitted a consultation form proposing changes to the National Minimum Standards in enabling safe, effective environments for children. As a leading organisation, they guide members to focus on quality improvement - giving us updates on staffing ratios, safety and curriculum integration - making sure that process and structural quality is maintained everywhere across all settings within Wales (Early Years Wales, 2025).

However, practitioners in non-maintained settings have raised concerns regarding the use of ECERS in making policy-decisions. This is exemplified in the '*Study of Quality of Early Years Provision in England*' report published by the UK Department of Education. The report highlighted that this scale does not adequately measure the quality of interactions that promote secure, safe relationships between professionals and students, or complex conceptual development in children. Moreover, they suggested that the "quality of... provisional support, as well as the quality of provision for two years olds" must be improved (DfE, 2017; DfE, 2025). The word 'provision' is important in the context of care and quality in the Early Years, because it encompasses the entirety of a child's experience, shaping who they are as 'ambitious, capable learners', 'enterprising, creative contributors', 'ethical, informed citizens', and 'healthy, confident individuals' in their lives (WG, 2022; Equal Education Partners, 2023). If this is not realised, then children cannot achieve process and structural quality, which is at the forefront of this curriculum (Education Policy Institute, 2018). Unlike this approach, professionals may wish to use tools such as SSTEWS (Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being) for evaluating pedagogical interactions. The SSTEWS scale builds on the ECERS scale. They focus

on the role that adults play in providing high-quality learning environment for students. They also emphasised on sustained verbal and non-verbal communication skills between children and trusted adults. The scores must represent professional judgement of staff behaviours, responses, and interactions, and the resulting children's experiences with the setting (Siraj-Blatchford, Kingston, Melhuish, and Sylva, 2015; Tower Hamlets, 2025). Lastly, the SSTEW is linked to quality assurance, because it allows practitioners to monitor children's progress effectively, and improve teaching to improve standards, unlike ECERS.

On the other hand, though, it can be argued that Wales has faced severe challenges in delivering high-quality early years provision. An example of this is the research that Early Years Wales conducted a few years ago. They proposed that '82% of respondents reported that they have experienced difficulties in recruiting new professionals within their settings.' If professionals are not funded enough for their job, then it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain high-quality care, and service standards. They will not be able to undergo continuous reflection and improvement in their settings, and so quality provision is depressed (WG, 2022; Early Years Wales, 2025). Due to this, professionals cannot be embedding enabling adults, effective environments, and engaging experiences into everyday practice. As a result of this, children feel less empowered to take decisions, become more independent with their lives, and grow their confidence. Therefore, professionals will not be able to refine, adapt, and enhance their learning provision, that is suited and registered to the needs of students (IFS, 2024; Estyn, 2024; WG, 2025; WG, 2026).

Similarly, the Welsh Government's Flying Start guidance sets expectations for high-quality provision; complying with *Regulation 17 of The Child Minding and Day Care (Wales) Regulations 2010*; however, because professionals are severely underfunded and staff are facing external pressures, this might inevitably limit the setting's ability to meet these standards (Legislation GOV UK, 2010; WG, 2026). Although, this study would have been more useful, if contextual factors influencing recruiting professionals, such as inequality and poverty gap, funding crisis, leadership pipeline, and the effectiveness of careers support, had been further explored. By analysing these issues more carefully, the research would have provided a clear understanding of how structural challenges interact with local practices, and how settings might realistically work towards sustaining high-quality provision despite ongoing pressures (Welsh Parliament, 2024; Estyn, 2025).

However, the Welsh Government has recently published a report, 'Strategic Education Workforce Plan', and their ambition is to ensure that professionals will be supported to engage with '*nationally available, coherent and high-quality support*' to substantially improve outcomes for all learners. They must develop an '*evidence-informed professional learning... based on evidence of need, to continually develop their own practice, and improve the quality of teaching at different stages within...*

school contexts' (WLGA, 2025; WG, 2026). Therefore, reforms such as implementing the New Curriculum for Wales, were co-constructed by the Welsh Government, education expertise, and professionals, to ensure that process quality is embedded in all aspects of school life - as it is used to drive interactions, pedagogy, and cultivating learning experiences for all (WG, 2022; Waters-Davies, 2022). Due to this, perceptions towards quality have changed over time in EYEC. Professionals use an '*evidence-informed*' approach, such as observations, or regular assessment, to make effective decisions as to how each pupil can thrive in their stimulating environments, as '*unique children*', in achieving holistic development. Quality, is nowadays seen as a dynamic, and contested concept, rather than a fixed standard (Theobald *et al.*, 2025; Montessori Academy, 2026). Whilst the Education Sector experiences severe challenges in Wales, the Welsh Government's commitment to strengthening relationships with professionals through the Workforce Plan 2026, may potentially undermine the reliability of the research previously proposed by Early Years Wales.

Nonetheless, both ECERS and the Early Years Wales are used to enhance high-quality care provision for children aged 0-5. For example, the ECERS is used as an indicator for assessing children's outcomes and performance in their environment. This is an observation-based instrument, implying that the professionals use their judgement to make informed decisions regarding the pupil's competence and behaviour. It has a comprehensive coverage, as this scale is used internationally for determining whether a child has achieved process or structural quality (ISBE, 2026). Similarly, quality assessment has been reinforced by key theorists such as Vygotsky. He believed in this perception that assessment should be based on the learner's potential, rather than just the current, independent achievements. He argues that professionals must target the Zone of Proximal Development - the distance between what a learner can already do by themselves (actual development), and what they can achieve with guidance (potential development) (Smolucha, 2021; Newman and Latifi, 2021; Veraksa and Samuelsson, 2022). By employing Vygotsky's theory into practice, professionals could potentially monitor children's development, identify their needs and aid future curriculum planning (GOV UK, 2024).

Likewise, the Early Years Wales focus on pedagogic quality, using Reflective Practice and the Quality of Cymraeg Assessment. Firstly, professionals are encouraged to take the '*Flying Start Childcare: Guidance*' to ensure that settings provide enriching and engaging experiences for children to '*learn, develop and socialise*' with their peers in a safe, stimulating environment. This is designed so that the provision is of the highest quality possible. Children must be supported by enabling adults, in the hopes of fulfilling their process quality (Vale of Glamorgan, 2026; WG, 2026). Furthermore, this guidance is aligned with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and Schon's Reflective Model. That is because, in the microsystem, children's development is influenced by the relationships between adults and other

professionals in this environment. Schools that adopt this guidance are more likely to cultivate authentic learning experiences for children, thereby strengthening their process and structural quality (Sadownik, 2023; Estyn, 2024).

More importantly, Schon regarded that reflection takes place through reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. In hindsight, professionals use reflection-in-action through ongoing assessment, enabling them to recognise children's accomplishments, while identifying areas for future improvement, to shape and cultivate their learning experiences. Through such reflection, professionals begin to understand children's needs, allowing them to plan purposeful activities that enhance learning and strengthen their process quality (Tan, 2020; Schon, 1992; Open University, 2026). The use of reflective practice ensures professional development, allowing individuals to evaluate quality interactions through relevant guidance and policy.

Lastly, the ECERS and Early Years Wales are inextricably linked to the previous assignment. Policies such as *National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for Children up to the ages of 12 years* (WG, 2023) and *Regulation 16 of The Child Minding and Day Care (Wales) Regulations 2010* were reinforced during the presentation. All these policies focus on how we can deliver the highest possible quality care service to our children in settings. They are intended to allow a multi-agency approach, allowing professionals to develop '*quality provision tailored to the needs of our children.*' High-quality settings have a lasting impact on children's outcomes and development for later life. The experiences they cultivate will be relevant for lifelong learning, active citizenship and future employment. This enables that children have a comprehensive, flying start to their lives (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2024). All these policies are closely related to ECERS and Early Years Wales, because they place emphasis on quality assurance, and regulation of childcare in Wales. These policies are designed so that professionals can maintain high quality provision of childcare (structural and process quality), care, learning and safety for children.

In conclusion, this essay has critically analysed two methods of ensuring the highest possible quality assurance of children's development. The most obvious findings emerged from ECERS and Early Years Wales is that high-quality assurance is achieved when professionals engage in reflective practice, undergo continuous professional development, and focus on high-quality interactions with children. They proposed that pedagogic quality, such as observation or assessment, is essential to understanding the needs of children. In the future, a more thorough analysis of issues in Wales - such as regional disparities or high levels of inequality - could help explain why some pupils achieve low-quality learning potential.

Confirmation Statement - Use of Generative AI

I confirm I have not presented any AI generated text as my own word. I confirm I have copies of my own drafts, notes, and resources, that I have previously used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

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