

Reflection Paper

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work.

Quality, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2019) is how good or bad something or someone is. The Collins Dictionary (2019) looks at quality in terms of the good characteristics that someone has as a part of their nature and that you can describe a person or a thing as quality. Quality is often seen as important and is strived for by many people, across multiple businesses and sectors. Reed (2024) believes that for businesses or settings to be considered as quality then a culture of quality needs to be instilled in every member of staff. He goes on to say that ensuring quality comes from all members of the team seeing having high quality standards as their responsibility, he believes that this will then encourage and empower continuous improvement and accountability across a workforce, resulting in a higher quality all round.

In terms of the Early Years sector, high quality is of the utmost importance. Birth to 5 Matters (n.d.), state that effective high quality experiences within early years will have a positive impact on a child's development and onwards through all their schooling and into later life. They note that effective leadership alongside quality improvement sits alongside the four basic principles of practice within EYFS. As The Department of Education (2024) states the four principles include treating every child as an unique individual, building strong relationships to enhance learning, creating environments that are tailored to suit learning and finally learning and development. As previously mentioned in the definition given by the Cambridge Dictionary, quality can relate to someone or something, so when this is put into a EYFS context, quality is key. As Harrop (2024) states, a high quality environment is key as babies and young children flourish in good quality environments. Furthermore, she goes on to say that the environment that children learn, play and socialise in from an early age will have an impact on their development for the rest of their lives, demonstrating the impact of high quality environments across EYFS

The National Children's Bureau (2025), have formulated Quality Improvement Principles (QIPs) that are aimed at supporting professionals, enabling them to improve the quality of their early years provisions. The six principles span a wide variety of areas including leadership, equality and inclusive practice, as well as supporting wellbeing. They see quality within these principles as ever evolving and as a result they have implemented a cycle that they use when assessing the quality of each principle. This cycle includes: reviewing current practice, responding to any changes that are needed within practice before finally reflecting on the impact that these changes have had on the children, families and practitioners within the setting. This process demonstrates that high quality is something that can be achieved but

then also lost if standards of practice slip. This cycle resembles the Quality of Care review that is outlined in the National Minimum Standards for regulated childcare, Welsh Government (2023a). They state that the review should aim to represent a continuous cycle which then develops into a positive culture of improvement within settings. Moreover, they believe that utilising tools and methods such as Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan in Wales (n.d.) and other endorsed quality schemes will help in efforts to improve quality. Continuously reviewing, responding to and reflecting on changes within settings allows for high quality practice to continue. Furthermore, Reed and Canning (2012) also note the importance of reflective practice in the continuous improvement of quality within early years settings. They are of the opinion that the quality improvement process is best undertaken by practitioners who not only apply reflective practice, but also those who have the professional capacity to understand why they are undertaking reflective practice. They see reflective practice as a complex process that should be championed by and personalised to practitioners. They conclude by saying that quality improvement is an ongoing process that should be supported by external frameworks, such as the National Minimum Standards for regulated childcare, Welsh Government (2023b), and not driven by them. Meaning that practitioners should use frameworks such as the NMS as a guide before then personalising what quality looks like within their settings and then striving to improve on that.

The Education Endowment Foundation (2024), also notes the importance of high quality practice within early years settings. They state that improving the quality of a provision is a positive for every child, especially those from a socio-economic disadvantaged background. They go on to say that research shows that high quality education is one of the most effective ways to ensure every child can thrive throughout their school lives, regardless of their background. The Education Policy Institute (n.d) reports that by the end of Reception, children experiencing disadvantage are on average 4.6 months behind their peers in their learning. Furthermore, they state that the gap doubles once they reach the end of their primary school lives, before doubling again when secondary school concludes. However, they identify high-quality early years education and childcare setting as a catalyst in preventing this gap beginning, as it gives practitioners the earliest opportunity to have a positive impact upon a child's life, influencing their opinions on education throughout their lives, this demonstrates the importance of quality provision within early years. This opinion is also shared by Sir Martyn Oliver, his majesty's chief inspector, Ofsted (2024).

He states that "A high-quality early education benefits all children, particularly the most vulnerable, and is far too important to be left to chance. Learning in the early years is fundamental to providing children with the tools they need to thrive throughout their education, and beyond. That is all the more important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. If we get early education right for our most

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vulnerable children, we'll get it right for all children." This once again demonstrates the vital importance of quality within early years settings for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, its effect on children within settings should not be underestimated.

One method of quality assurance used across Early Years settings in Wales is the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, PACEY. PACEY (2024a) is a charity that was established in 1977 that aims to support everyone within childcare and Early Years settings in providing high quality services, information and advice to not only children but their families and carers. They believe that by allowing children access to high quality childcare and early education will in turn help them have a bright future. PACEY (2024b) outline a number of advantages that their mission has on settings across Wales. They state that they have managed to reach nearly 100,000 children and their families, with their support allowing practitioners to care for some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in Wales. The importance of this is outlined by the NSPCC (2022) who note that during the early years of a child's life the foundations of all future learning and behaviour are laid. Babies and young children rely on practitioners to meet their needs and the quality of the relationship is integral to development.

PACEY (2024c) note a plethora of advantages that their work provides to daycare and early education settings. They work closely with the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) and Estyn allowing settings to stay updated with new policies and procedures. Furthermore, they work closely with the Welsh Government to both represent childcare practitioners' views as well as aiming to influence the futures of children in Wales. Being able to feed back to settings what is expected of them in the eyes of the government and the CIW or Estyn will allow settings to achieve high levels of quality. PACEY also forms ½ of Cwlwm, a group of organisations brought together to deliver a bilingual service that will ensure the best possible outcomes for children and their families in Wales, cwlwm.org.uk (2016). They also aim to support families in ensuring affordable, quality childcare is accessible to all, whilst also meeting the needs of families on an individual basis. Although the advantages of PACEY are clear when it comes to driving quality, the subscription fee that members have to pay would be seen as a significant drawback by many practitioners. Social Mobility Commission (2020) notes that a mix of workload, lack of career development and low wages are responsible for poor staff retention in the Early Years sector. The average wage of an early years worker is less than minimum wage, so by PACEY charging a yearly subscription fee it may alienate some professionals who feel priced out by the amount of money they have to pay to become a member.

As noted, organisations such as PACEY or groups of organisations such as Cwlwm can be used to drive change within early years settings. There are also environmental scales that can be used by practitioners, within settings, that run

concurrently alongside the children in practice. An example of one of these scales is the Leuven Scale. Pioneered by Ferre Laevers, the Leuven Scale helps practitioners to understand how happy and comfortable a child is within a setting, Arnerich (2021). They note that according to Laevers, high levels of wellbeing and involvement allow children the best possible opportunity to develop and learn. Research conducted by Guimaraes et al (2016) shows that practitioners were keen to welcome wellbeing and involvement indicators, such as the Leuven Scale, as starting points for their baseline assessments. They noted that both wellbeing and engagement with the environment are important when it comes to transitions into settings, this could be used also to help assess a settings quality when it comes to organising transitions and settling children and their families into their settings. Learning Journals (2021a) note that the Leuven Scale being an observational tool is a positive for practitioners as observational teaching has been shown to be the most effective method of Early Years development teaching. Furthermore, as the scale focuses on wellbeing it prevents it from being used as a blanket approach that is applied to every child. It encourages practitioners to tailor it to each child, reacting to the needs of each child. However, it is often argued that the Leuven Scale does not cater to all children, especially those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), Learning Journals (2021b). The behaviours described in the scale are often not obvious or even present in children with ALN especially those non-verbal children. The schools census carried out by the Welsh Government (2024) reports that there are currently 52,152 students with ALN within Welsh schools, 11.2% of all children. This statistic demonstrates the need for methods of assessment being suitable for all children, including those with ALN, to give all children the best possible chance of being successful.

When comparing the two methods, PACEY and the Leuven Scale, in terms of driving quality they are incredibly different. PACEY gives practitioners clear insight into what the government and inspecting bodies see as high-quality and essential within settings in a broad sense. Whilst scales such as Leuven drive quality by looking more closely at what each child needs on an individual basis and what they see as quality provision for themselves. Both methods have many positives, as well as some drawbacks too. Using what is best suited to each setting will in turn drive quality within that setting, making sure every child has the best possible opportunity to learn and develop throughout their education.

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