

Leadership and Management for systems of quality

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Part 2.

Quality in the Early Years

Introduction

Quality is not generally understood as a fixed or universally agreed concept, but as one whose meaning varies according to context, purpose and perspective (Martin, Elg and Gremyr, 2025). In early childhood education and care, definitions of quality are informed not only by policy and inspection frameworks, but also by broader views of childhood, care, learning and development (Moss, 2016; Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2017). This perspective is reinforced by Rogers *et al.* (2025), who found that practitioners' understandings of quality did not always correspond with policy perspectives, suggesting that quality remains a negotiated rather than fixed concept in early childhood practice. Accordingly, quality is commonly seen to include both structural features, such as practitioners' qualifications, ratios and resources, and process features, including interactions, emotional support and children's experiences of learning within the setting (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015).

Birth to 5 Matters (2024) emphasises that children benefit not simply from attending a setting, but from the quality of the experiences available within it. Similarly, Eadie *et al.* (2022) identify consistent associations between high-quality provision and children's cognitive, social and emotional development, while Ang *et al.* (2025) highlight the contribution of responsive adult-child interaction to communication and learning. The OECD (2025) further states that effective early childhood education and care support both immediate well-being and longer-term developmental and educational outcomes. Raikes *et al.* (2023) also argue that expanding participation in early childhood provision is of limited benefit if insufficient attention is given to children's day-to-day experiences in practice. This evidence suggests that access alone is insufficient, as positive outcomes depend on the extent to which provision actively supports children's holistic development and everyday well-being.

A conceptual difference may therefore be drawn between quality assurance and quality enhancement. Williams (2016) argues that quality assurance is commonly associated with accountability and the monitoring of standards, whereas quality enhancement is more closely concerned with the continuous development of

practice. This is particularly significant in early years settings, where quality depends not only on the presence of appropriate systems, but also on whether these lead to meaningful improvements in children's everyday experiences. This paper will critically reflect on Quality for All (QfA) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale (SSTEWS) as additional approaches to quality assurance, evaluating the extent to which they support quality improvement in early years settings.

Quality for All (QfA) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale (SSTEWS)

Quality for All (QfA) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale (SSTEWS) are two additional approaches used to evaluate and strengthen quality in early childhood education and care beyond statutory requirements (Howard *et al.*, 2018; Edwards, 2021). QfA, developed by Early Years Wales (2020), is a whole-setting quality assurance framework that supports settings through self-evaluation, professional dialogue, observation of practice and annual reaccreditation. Its primary focus is on organisational development, leadership, reflective practice and the systems through which consistency is supported across the setting. In contrast, SSTEWS is a research-based observational tool used to evaluate children's day-to-day experiences, with particular focus on emotional well-being, communication, sustained shared thinking and the ways in which practitioners support learning (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015; Howard *et al.*, 2018).

This distinction is significant because quality in early years provision is widely understood as multi-dimensional, involving both structural features, such as leadership, staffing and organisation, and process features, such as interaction, pedagogy and emotional support (National Assembly for Wales, 2019). In this context, QfA is more closely aligned with the organisational conditions that support improvement across the setting, whereas SSTEWS is more directly concerned with the interactions and pedagogical experiences through which children engage with provision in the practice. However, neither method offers a complete account of provision in isolation. Slot (2018) argues that structural conditions alone provide only a partial account of quality, while Edwards (2021) similarly emphasises the importance of pedagogy and curriculum in shaping children's everyday experiences

of learning. QfA may reveal whether systems for reflection and improvement are embedded, but it offers less detailed insight into the quality of adult-child interaction. Likewise, SSTEW provides close evidence of process quality, but does not fully capture the wider organisational structures that influence practice over time. Consequently, their value lies in the different but complementary forms of evidence they provide, although neither can independently offer a fully comprehensive account of quality in early years settings.

Strengths and Limitations

Although both methods are intended to enhance quality beyond statutory requirements, they generate different forms of evidence and support improvement in different ways (Douglass, 2019). QfA appears particularly valuable in revealing whether reflective practice, staff communication, shared expectations, and long-term planning are embedded consistently across the setting (Early Years Wales, 2020). Its contribution, therefore, extends beyond simple evaluation, as it enables leaders and practitioners to consider whether the organisational structures and professional processes required for sustained improvement are genuinely established. This is especially significant within the Welsh context, where the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2023) provide an essential regulatory foundation but do not, in themselves, secure ongoing quality development. From this perspective, the effectiveness of QfA may lie not only in identifying strengths and weaknesses, but also in encouraging a more critical examination of how leadership capacity and organisational culture shape the potential for improvement over time. This reflects wider evidence that leadership is central to creating, sustaining, and embedding the conditions through which quality develops in the longer term (OECD, 2025).

However, because QfA adopts a whole-setting perspective, it is better suited to assessing whether organisational structures support improvement than to examining in depth the pedagogical interactions through which children experience learning in everyday practice (Siraj *et al.*, 2019; Edwards, 2021). Moreover, its effectiveness is shaped by the honesty, critical engagement, and depth of staff self-evaluation, since meaningful reflective practice depends on practitioners participating openly and collaboratively in the review process (Ruming and McFarland, 2022). This raises questions about the extent to which QfA can provide robust evidence of practice, as

the presence of systems for reflection and review does not necessarily indicate that these are enacted consistently or effectively. As a result, it may be less effective in capturing the quality of adult-child interaction, communication, and responsiveness to children's learning and emotional well-being.

By contrast, SSTEW contributes to quality improvement by examining the interactional and pedagogical conditions through which children encounter learning in everyday practice (Hoare, no date). Howard *et al.* (2018) describe it as a research-based observational tool concerned with emotional well-being, communication, sustained shared thinking and support for learning. Its principal strength lies in the detailed evidence it provides about whether practitioners are extending children's thinking, encouraging dialogue and responding sensitively to individual needs. This is particularly significant when considered through Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which positions learning as socially mediated and emphasises the importance of dialogue and scaffolding in extending understanding. This theoretical perspective is reinforced by recent evidence presented by Sluiter, Fekkink and Fekkes (2025) and Ang *et al.* (2025), which links the quality of children's everyday experiences and adult-child conversational exchanges to developmental outcomes, thereby strengthening the case for evaluative approaches that attend closely to process quality.

However, SSTEW also presents practical limitations. Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) show that its effective use depends on detailed observation and the collection of substantial evidence across multiple areas of practice, which may make implementation demanding in settings where staff time and capacity are constrained. Although SSTEW is valuable for examining how quality is enacted through pedagogy, its observation-based design means that it may capture only a snapshot of practice rather than the full complexity of everyday provision (Janta, Van Belle and Stewart, 2016). Consequently, it can identify whether high-quality interaction is evident at a particular moment yet offers more limited insight into the wider organisational conditions that influence whether such practice can be sustained across the setting over time, including leadership, staffing stability, training opportunities, and organisational culture.

Using Quality Assurance Evidence to Support Improvement

OECD (2022) argues that quality assurance is valuable not only as a mechanism for checking whether standards are being met, but also as a means of generating evidence, reflection and support for ongoing improvement in practice. This position is reinforced by Harrison *et al.* (2022), who suggest that sustained quality improvement depends on collaborative leadership, professional learning and reflective practice embedded within everyday work. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the significance of quality assurance lies less in the identification of strengths and weaknesses than in the extent to which evidence relating to organisational coherence, leadership, interaction and emotional support is used to inform continuous improvement across the setting.

Where QfA reveals inconsistency in shared expectations, staff communication or collective responsibility for development, this suggests that the organisational conditions necessary to sustain improvement may not yet be securely embedded (Early Years Wales, 2020). In this respect, QfA appears to function more convincingly as an evaluative framework than as an intervention, since its principal contribution lies in identifying whether the conditions required for improvement are in place rather than in directly securing change (Douglass, 2019). This raises important questions about the extent to which the identification of weakness alone can lead to meaningful improvement, particularly in early years settings where quality is shaped not only by formal structures, but also by the extent to which leadership, collegiality and professional learning are embedded within everyday practice (Burnham, 2016; Siraj and Hallet, 2016). In the Welsh context, this is especially significant because quality in early childhood education and care is recognised as multi-dimensional, and statutory standards may therefore provide a necessary foundation without ensuring the ongoing reflection and shared professional dialogue required for continuous improvement (National Assembly for Wales, 2019). From this perspective, where QfA identifies weaknesses in organisational coherence, one practical improvement within the setting would be the introduction of structured reflective supervision and regular team review meetings, which may help translate evaluative findings into shared priorities, collective accountability and monitored action, thereby enhancing consistency and responsiveness across the setting (Brock, 2015). Although reflection

is frequently associated with professional learning and improved practice in early years settings (Hayes *et al.*, 2025), its significance depends on whether it results in sustained professional challenge and observable improvement in provision. Without this, organisational review may remain largely procedural, with limited value beyond identifying concerns that are already visible but insufficiently addressed (OECD, 2022; Harrison *et al.*, 2022). It could therefore be argued that QfA is most useful in exposing organisational barriers to improvement and in supporting a more coherent basis for quality enhancement. However, it remains less capable of illuminating the pedagogical and interactional dimensions through which quality is experienced by children on a day-to-day basis (Edwards, 2021). This reinforces the view that evaluative frameworks are important, but insufficient on their own unless they are accompanied by critical professional engagement that meaningfully reshapes practice and improves children's experiences within the setting.

By contrast, where SSTEWE identifies weaknesses in communication, responsive interaction and the quality of adult-child exchanges, this suggests that limitations are located more directly within pedagogy and process quality rather than within organisational structure alone (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). In this respect, SSTEWE functions more convincingly as an evaluative framework than as an intervention, since its principal contribution lies in identifying how quality is experienced through children's interactions, emotional well-being and support for learning (Howard *et al.*, 2018; Siraj *et al.*, 2019). From this perspective, a second improvement would be professional development informed by the ShREC (EEF, 2025) approach, which may help address the weaknesses identified. ShREC emphasises shared attention, responsive interaction, the extension of children's language and sustained conversation (EEF, 2025), and in practice, this would involve practitioners responding contingently to children's cues, extending language through modelling and questioning, and sustaining meaningful interaction during play and routine experiences. This appears particularly relevant where Ang *et al.* (2025) indicate that children may not be experiencing sufficiently rich opportunities for communication, shared thinking and learning. Such findings highlight the value of SSTEWE in identifying aspects of practice that are most closely connected to children's day-to-day experiences within the setting. However, the effectiveness of this response is likely to depend on whether practitioners are given sufficient time,

support and opportunity to revisit their practice, since sustained improvement is shaped not simply by training, but by reflective learning, effective leadership and the wider conditions that support change over time (Siraj and Hallet, 2016). This indicates that the value of ShREC lies not merely in the introduction of a structured approach, but in the extent to which it becomes embedded within everyday pedagogy and results in observable improvement in the quality of interaction experienced by children. Overall, SSTEWS is useful in revealing what requires development at the level of interaction and pedagogy, although it is less able to account for the broader organisational factors that may enable or constrain such improvement over time (Janta, Van Belle and Stewart, 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, quality in early years provision cannot be understood through statutory compliance alone, as minimum standards do not in themselves ensure the reflective, responsive and developmentally supportive practice associated with high-quality provision. This discussion has shown that additional approaches such as QfA and SSTEWS are valuable because they direct attention towards dimensions of quality that statutory requirements may not fully capture. QfA is more effective in revealing organisational conditions for improvement (Early Years Wales, 2020), whereas SSTEWS offers closer insight into children's interactional and pedagogical experiences (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). However, their significance lies not simply in evaluation, but in the extent to which the evidence they produce informs reflective action and sustained improvement. It could therefore be argued that quality enhancement depends not only on assessment, but on how settings use evidence to strengthen children's everyday experiences.

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