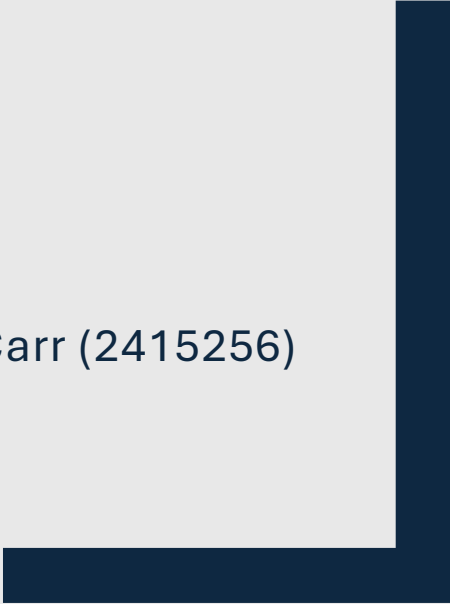




Leadership and management for systems of quality ECEY6011

Nicola Carr (2415256)



Contents:

AI statement	p. 2
Reflection	p. 3
References	p. 10

I acknowledge that I used an AI tool (Microsoft Copilot) to support the development of my essay.

I used the following prompt:

1. *"Please check grammar, structure and flow of my essay."*

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

I confirm that I have retained copies of my drafts, notes, and all other resources used before and after the use of AI tools, and I understand that I may be asked to provide these as evidence.

Reflection

How do additional methods of quality assurance promote and ensure quality above statutory requirements, and how useful are they as tools for improvement?

The Welsh Government's (2023a) National Minimum Standards (NMS) establish that childcare in Wales is regulated by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), providing the baseline for registration, inspection and accountability. However, while these standards provide a foundation, quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) cannot be defined in one fixed way. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) argue that quality is shaped by values and perspectives rather than being neutral, while Moss (2016) questions whether it can be reduced to measurable standards. More recent policy discussion also highlights that quality includes both structural aspects of provision and children's everyday experiences (COFACE Families Europe, 2024). High-quality provision therefore requires an understanding what children experience in practice and how this can be improved over time. Additional methods of quality assurance generate deeper insight into children's experiences, staff practice and leadership capacity beyond regulation alone.

This reflection critically evaluates two methods of quality assurance above statutory requirements: the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS) and the Baby Effective Early Learning Programme (BEEL). It argues that both methods are valuable because they move discussion beyond minimum standards and support ongoing quality enhancement. However, neither tool is sufficient on its own. Theobald, Whiteford and McFadden (2025) emphasise that quality in ECEC is shaped by context, values and multiple perspectives, rather than being fixed or universally defined. This reinforces that quality assurance tools must be applied critically.

Quality in ECEC can be understood as a value-laden, subjective and dynamic concept that varies according to perspective, time and place (Bertram and Pascal, 2006). This challenges the assumption that quality can be captured through a single inspection judgement or checklist. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) similarly argue that quality is

socially constructed and should not be treated as a fixed technical truth, while Moss (2016) questions whether the sector's focus on measurable indicators can narrow understanding rather than encourage reflection. These perspectives highlight that what counts as 'high quality' viewed differently by stakeholders. For example, inspectors may prioritise compliance, safety and leadership, whereas parents often place greater emphasis on trust, communication and relationships (Department for Education, 2012). Children may value belonging, enjoyment and engaging experiences, while staff may focus on resources, teamwork and professional support. Quality is therefore multi-perspectival rather than singular.

Despite these debates, there is strong evidence that high-quality ECEC plays a significant role in children's development. Sluiter, Fekkink and Fekkes (2025) found, in their meta-analysis of longitudinal studies, that process quality is a small but significant predictor of children's socio-emotional development over time, with effects extending into adolescence. Process quality refers to the interactions and experiences children have within settings, including caregiver-child relationships, guided exploration and emotional support. Similarly, Rankin *et al.* (2024) emphasise that examining how specific aspects of provision influence children's development is essential for improving early experiences and life chances. Earlier longitudinal research from the EPPE/EPPSE project, also found that high-quality early education can act as a protective factor, particularly for disadvantaged children, and can positively influence later social and educational outcomes (Sylva *et al.*, 2014). Taken together, this reinforces that quality extends beyond meeting regulatory expectations and shapes children's everyday experiences, wellbeing and long-term development. Against this background, the usefulness of additional quality assurance methods depends on the kind of information they generate and how that information is used to improve practice.

The first method considered here, SSTEWS, is particularly useful because it focuses on process quality and the quality of daily adult-child interaction (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). Rather than concentrating only on structural factors such as policies, resources or routines, SSTEWS examines emotional wellbeing, adult-child relationships, sustained shared thinking, and the ways practitioners support language, curiosity and

problem solving. Inspection frameworks may identify whether procedures are in place, but do not always capture children's moment-to-moment experiences. For example, the Education Inspection Framework highlights a shift away from focusing solely on documentation towards the substance of education, recognising that what happens in practice is more important than what is recorded (Ofsted, 2019). This suggests that a setting may be fully compliant on paper yet still offer limited dialogue, weak emotional attunement or missed opportunities to extend children's thinking.

A major strength of SSTEWS is that it makes interactional quality visible, particularly in relation to children's emotional wellbeing and sustained shared thinking (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). It helps staff identify what is happening in practice and where development is needed. This is illustrated by Gealy et al. (2020), whose work in Welsh Flying Start settings found, through SSTEWS-informed observation and professional learning, that interactions supporting problem solving, curiosity, concept development and higher-order thinking were among the least well-developed areas of practice. This shows that settings may appear caring and organised while still requiring development in pedagogy and interaction. SSTEWS therefore supports a move from vague statements such as "we are nurturing" towards more precise analysis of how adults support children's language, reasoning and emotional wellbeing. In this respect, SSTEWS is beneficial because it generates detailed evidence that can inform staff continuing professional development, supervision and reflective discussion.

However, SSTEWS also has limitations. First, it depends on the quality and interpretation of observation, meaning that findings are influenced by the observer and the context in which observations take place (Siraj *et al.*, 2019). Any observation captures a snapshot rather than the full life of the setting, meaning that what is seen on one day may not fully represent practice over time. Second, SSTEWS is strongest in evaluating interactional quality, but weaker in explaining wider organisational issues. For example, it may reveal limited higher-order questioning, but not explain whether this stems from staff confidence, inadequate training, staffing instability, weak leadership or time pressure. Third, the tool itself does not create improvement. Improvement depends on what leaders and staff do with the evidence afterwards. SSTEWS is therefore best understood

as a diagnostic tool, with its value becoming clearer when considered alongside broader approaches such as BEEL.

The second method, BEEL, offers a broader and more explicitly developmental approach to quality assurance. Bertram and Pascal (2006) describe BEEL as a supported programme of self-evaluation and improvement for settings working with children from birth to three, emphasising the role of systematic evidence gathering, reflection and action planning. This aligns with wider research which suggests that quality improvement in early years settings is most effective when it is continuous, reflective and embedded within everyday practice rather than treated as a one-off judgement (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2017). BEEL also positions quality as a journey rather than a fixed threshold, arguing that national standards should be understood as a starting point, not the finishing line (Bertram and Pascal, 2006).

BEEL is particularly valuable because it moves beyond measurement, embedding quality within an ongoing cycle of reflection, action and review. This cyclical approach reflects broader models of reflective practice and professional learning, which emphasise that improvement is sustained when practitioners are actively involved in evaluating and developing their own practice (Aubrey, 2016). The framework also highlights the importance of involving multiple stakeholders, including practitioners, parents/carers and children, in the evaluation process (Bertram and Pascal, 2006). Involving different perspectives supports a holistic understanding of quality. Unlike a single observational scale, BEEL supports whole-setting development, encourages staff ownership and links quality assurance to organisational change, which is considered central to effective leadership in early years settings (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2017).

Another important strength of BEEL is its connection to workforce development. Social Care Wales (2025) states that the All Wales induction framework for early years and childcare includes the knowledge, understanding and practice that should be demonstrated over time, supported by guidance, progress logs and workbooks. This suggests that sustained quality depends on a competent and reflective workforce. This

aligns with wider research which emphasises that reflective practice and ongoing professional development are central to improving quality in early years provision (Aubrey, 2016). BEEL supports this by treating practitioners as active participants in self-evaluation and by building a shared language of quality. In this sense, it aligns closely with the leadership role in developing and maintaining an open, positive culture which supports high-quality care (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2017).

Nevertheless, BEEL should also be critiqued. It is an older framework rooted in a different policy context, and some of its references relate to English standards and inspection systems current at the time of publication. This means it cannot be transferred uncritically into contemporary Welsh settings. In addition, because BEEL relies heavily on self-evaluation, there is a risk that judgements may become overly positive unless supported by external challenge or strong leadership, reflecting wider concerns within the literature about the limitations of self-assessment in quality assurance processes (Siraj *et al.*, 2019). It may also be time-intensive for settings already managing significant administrative demands. However, these limitations do not remove its value; rather, they suggest that BEEL is most effective when adapted thoughtfully and used alongside current policy frameworks and complementary sources of evidence.

When compared, SSTEWS and BEEL conceptualise quality in different ways. SSTEWS is narrower but deeper, focusing on interactional and pedagogical experiences in daily practice, whereas BEEL takes a broader approach, focusing on organisational development, stakeholder engagement and cyclical improvement. SSTEWS therefore provides insight into how adults support emotional wellbeing, language and sustained shared thinking, and how children experience interactional support. However, it does not fully show whether leadership systems are effective, whether staff induction is robust or why weaknesses exist. BEEL, by contrast, provides insight into how a setting evaluates itself, what evidence it gathers and how improvement is planned and reviewed. Yet it does not guarantee objectivity, nor does it necessarily demonstrate whether identified improvements are reflected in everyday interactions unless supported by observational evidence. This reinforces the view that no single method can fully

capture quality, and that different tools provide partial but complementary insights into practice.

Siraj *et al.* (2019), in their comparison of regulatory and non-regulatory measures of ECEC quality in Australia, found only modest positive associations between regulatory ratings and research-based quality scales. This suggests that quality is multi-dimensional and cannot be adequately understood through one framework alone. Therefore, improving provision requires multiple forms of information, including evidence of children's experiences, staff practice, leadership processes and stakeholder perspectives. To improve provision, leaders need information not only about what is happening for children, but also about why it is happening and what changes are needed. While tools such as SSTEWS provide detailed insight into interactional quality and children's lived experiences, BEEL offers broader information about organisational processes, self-evaluation and planned improvement. However, neither tool provides a complete picture. SSTEWS may identify what is happening in practice but not why, while BEEL may outline improvement priorities without fully evidencing how these are experienced by children. A strong quality assurance approach should therefore triangulate evidence from inspection, self-evaluation, observation, staff development records, parent voice, child voice and action-planning outcomes. This information is most useful when translated into staff development, changes to provision, reflective supervision and ongoing review. Other tools, such as environmental rating scales (for example, ECERS or SACERS), can provide additional insight into provision, but they offer only a partial view of quality and should be used alongside interactional and reflective approaches.

A further issue is the relationship between paperwork and lived practice. While documentation supports safeguarding and accountability, excessive administrative demands can reduce time for direct interaction with children. This creates a practical tension, where time spent evidencing practice may reduce time available to enact it. Leadership decisions around staffing and workload are therefore central to ensuring that quality assurance supports, rather than detracts from, children's experiences (Moss, 2016; Aubrey, 2016). Concerns have been raised that quality assurance can become

performative if it prioritises documentation over meaningful engagement (Moss, 2016). In this context, quality assurance is reframed from an administrative task into a pedagogical and leadership function.

SSTEW re-centres attention on children's lived experiences, while BEEL supports reflection, action and improvement. This links directly to staffing and leadership. Although revised Welsh standards removed the requirement for a supernumerary member of staff, maintaining this role may still support quality by protecting time for safeguarding, staff development and reflective practice (Welsh Government, 2023a; 2023b). In this context, additional staffing capacity can be used strategically to support quality assurance as a shared responsibility, for example through rotating staff roles in monitoring, reflection and improvement. This approach protects time for interaction with children while also strengthening staff development, distributed leadership and collective ownership of quality (Aubrey, 2016; Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2017). This highlights the distinction between minimum compliance and quality enhancement, where leadership decisions actively shape sustained improvement.

Overall, additional quality assurance methods are valuable because statutory requirements alone cannot fully capture the complexity of quality in ECEC. High-quality settings are distinguished not simply by compliance, but by their ability to use evidence to reflect, adapt and improve practice. SSTEW and BEEL provide different but complementary types of information: SSTEW offers insight into children's lived experiences and interactional quality, while BEEL supports whole-setting evaluation and improvement processes. When used together, and supported by strong leadership, they enable settings to move beyond compliance towards continuous improvement. Ultimately, quality assurance methods are most effective not in measuring quality alone, but in driving meaningful change in children's experiences, staff practice and organisational development.

References

Aubrey, C. (2016) *Leading and managing in the early years*. 2nd edn. SAGE.

Bertram, T. and Pascal, C. (2006) *The Baby Effective Early Learning Programme (BEEL): improving quality in early childhood settings for children from birth to three years*. Amber Publications.

Campbell-Barr, V. and Leeson, C. (2017) *Quality and leadership in the early years: research, theory and practice*. SAGE.

COFACE Families Europe (2024) *Quality in early childhood education and care: the family dimension of improving early childhood education and care services*. Available at: https://coface-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/ECEC_Position_Final.pdf (Accessed: 22 March 2026)

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P. and Pence, A. (2007) *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care*. Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203966150>

Department for Education (2012) *Childcare and early years survey of parents 2010*. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a79f82c40f0b66a2fbfef2d/DFE-RR156.pdf> (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Estyn (2022) *Changes to the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare*. Available at: https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2022-11/Changes%20to%20the%20National%20Minimum%20Standards%20for%20Regulated%20Childcare_0.pdf (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Gealy, A.-M., Tinney, G., MacDonald, N. and Waters, J. (2020) 'A socio-constructivist approach to developing a professional learning intervention for early childhood

education and care practitioners in Wales', *Professional Development in Education*, pp. 298–314. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1742187>

Moss, P. (2016) 'Why can't we get beyond quality?', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 17(1), pp. 8–15. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949115627895>

Ofsted (2019) *Education inspection framework 2019: inspecting the substance of education*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/education-inspection-framework-2019-inspecting-the-substance-of-education/education-inspection-framework-2019-inspecting-the-substance-of-education> (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Rankin, P., Staton, S., Jones, A., Hussain Potia, A., Houen, S., Healey, B. and Thorpe, K. (2024) *Australian Education Research Organisation: technical report- linking quality and child development in early childhood education and care*. Available at: <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/research/technical-reports/linking-quality-and-child-development-early-childhood-education-and-care> (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Siraj, I., Howard, S.J., Kingston, D., Neilsen-Hewett, C., Melhuish, E.C. and De Rosnay, M. (2019) 'Comparing regulatory and non-regulatory indices of early childhood education and care (ECEC) quality in the Australian early childhood sector', *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 46(3), pp. 365–383. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00325-3>

Siraj, I., Kingston, D. and Melhuish, E. (2023) *The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) Scale: supporting process quality in early childhood*. 1st edn. David Fulton Publishers. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003379867>

Sluiter, R.M.V., Fekkink, R.G. and Fekkes, M. (2025) 'The impact of process quality in early childhood education and care on socio-emotional development: a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 22(5), p. 775. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22050775>

Social Care Wales (2025) *Induction framework for early years and child care*, Social Care Wales. Available at: <https://socialcare.wales/qualifications-funding/induction-frameworks/induction-for-early-years-and-child-care> (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

The Scales (no date) ERS Institute. Available at: <https://www.ersi.info/scales> (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Theobald, M., Whiteford, C. and McFadden, A. (2025) 'Through their eyes: children's perspectives on quality in early childhood education', *Education Sciences*, 15(7), p. 836. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15070836>

Welsh Government (2023a) *National minimum standards for regulated childcare for children up to the age of 12 years*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2025-09/national-minimum-standards-for-regulated-childcare.pdf> (Accessed: 22 March 2026).

Welsh Government (2023b) *Summary of responses: proposed changes to the National Minimum Standards for regulated childcare*. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2023-03/summary-of-responses_2.pdf (Accessed: 22 March 2026).