

Reflection Paper – Part 2

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Appendix; I haven't used AI to help support me, with this assignment.

Quality in early childhood education and care is widely recognised as a critical factor in shaping children's developmental outcomes, wellbeing, and long term life chances. The early years represent a period of rapid brain development, during which children are highly sensitive to the environments, relationships, and learning experiences around them. High quality provision ensures that children are supported by skilled, responsive practitioners who create nurturing, purposeful, and developmentally appropriate environments. This combination of emotional security and rich learning opportunities forms the foundation for later cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes (Bowlby, 1969).

Although the concept of quality is complex and contested, research consistently identifies two core elements, structural quality, such as adult child ratios, staff qualifications, and stable staffing and process quality, the quality of interactions, relationships, and daily experiences. Structural elements create the conditions in which meaningful, child centred interactions can occur, while process quality reflects what children actually experience in their day to day lives (Education Policy Institute, 2018). Together, these dimensions shape how effectively a setting can meet children's developmental needs.

The Education Policy Institute highlights that high quality provision is strongly associated with well qualified staff, low turnover, and environments that enable sustained, responsive interactions, all of which contribute to improved cognitive and social and emotional outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children. (Education Policy Institute, 2020). Similarly, research published in the International Journal of Early Years Education emphasises that process quality, especially warm, responsive practitioner, child interactions is the most powerful predictor of children's wellbeing, engagement, and early learning (Slot, 2023). These findings demonstrate that quality is not simply about meeting regulatory standards, but about creating emotionally secure, relationally rich environments where children can explore, communicate, and develop a strong sense of belonging.

High quality early years provision is important because it has a measurable and lasting impact on children's outcomes. Evidence from long term studies shows that children who attend high quality early education achieve better cognitive, language, social, and behavioural outcomes, and these benefits extend into later schooling. For

example, the Effective Provision of Pre School Education study found that children who attended high quality settings achieved higher GCSE scores than those who did not, with quality acting as a key influence on long term attainment. (GOV.UK, 2024). Quality also plays a vital role in promoting social mobility, reducing the impact of disadvantage, and supporting children who have experienced early adversity.

We know that access to high quality settings matters because research consistently demonstrates that children's experiences in the early years shape their future learning, health, and wellbeing. High quality provision supports secure attachments, early language development, self regulation, and positive social relationships all of which are foundational for later success. On the other hand, low quality provision can limit children's opportunities, particularly for those already facing disadvantage. As Birth to 5 Matters (2025) emphasises, quality must be understood from the child's perspective, it is the lived experience of the child the relationships, interactions, and sense of belonging that ultimately determines whether provision is truly effective, reflecting Vygotsky's view that children learn and develop through social interaction and participation in meaningful relationships (Vygotsky, 1978).

In this context, ensuring that all children have access to high quality early years settings is not only an educational priority but a matter of equity and social justice. High quality provision gives children the best possible start in life, supports families, and contributes to stronger, healthier communities.

Ensuring high quality early years provision requires settings to engage in continuous reflection, evaluation, and improvement, a principle strongly emphasised within Welsh Government guidance on reflective practice (Welsh Government, 2026). Quality is not fixed, it is shaped by the lived experiences of children and families, the responsiveness of practitioners, and the effectiveness of the systems that support them. To strengthen and expand quality, settings must draw on a range of methods and tools that capture diverse perspectives and provide meaningful insight into practice. I have chosen two commonly used approaches which are parental, child and stakeholder questionnaires, and parent's evenings. Although both aim to enhance provision, they vary in purpose, depth, and the type of information they generate, and each plays a distinct role in strengthening overall quality.

Questionnaires are structured tools designed to gather feedback from parents, children in an age appropriate format and wider stakeholders such as staff, governors or external agencies. They often include a combination of rating scales and open ended questions, enabling settings to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach aligns with the Welsh Government's emphasis on partnership with families, as outlined in Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) and Birth to 5 Matters (2021), both of which highlight the importance of listening to parents and valuing their knowledge of the child. Questionnaires can reveal important information about parental satisfaction, communication, routines, relationships and children's sense of safety and belonging. When adapted for children, they can offer insight into how children feel about their environment, friendships and daily experiences. This reflects Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasises that children's development is shaped by interactions across multiple systems, including family, community and educational settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). By gathering feedback from these systems, practitioners gain a broader understanding of the factors influencing children's experiences.

However, questionnaires also have limitations. They may overlook emotional depth or the context behind responses, and families with literacy or language barriers may be less likely to participate. Children's responses may be influenced by adult interpretation, and the method cannot fully reflect the relational, moment to moment experiences that underpin process quality. This limitation aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which highlights that learning and development occur through social interaction and the collaborative construction of meaning.(Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, questionnaires may privilege the voices of more confident or articulate families, potentially marginalising those who are less engaged or who face economic barriers. Despite these challenges, questionnaires offer valuable advantages, they can reach a large number of families, encourage honest feedback through anonymity and provide quantifiable data that can be used for self evaluation and inspection. They can also be adapted to suit early childhood settings by offering multiple formats, using visual scales for children, providing translated versions and supporting families who may need help completing them. These adaptations ensure that feedback reflects the diversity of the setting and supports inclusive participation.

Parent's evenings provide a contrasting approach, offering a face to face opportunity for practitioners and families to discuss children's progress, wellbeing and experiences. This method supports Epstein's model of parental involvement, which emphasises communication, collaboration and shared responsibility for learning (Epstein, 2011). Parent's evenings allow practitioners to explore concerns in depth, understand family context and build trusting relationships. They offer rich, embedded information that would not typically emerge from a questionnaire. This socially grounded approach aligns strongly with Bowlby's attachment theory, which highlights the importance of secure, trusting relationships in supporting children's emotional security (Bowlby, 1969). When parents feel valued and understood, they are more likely to engage positively with the setting, which in turn supports the child's sense of safety and belonging. Parent's evenings also allow practitioners to share observations, plan next steps and respond sensitively to family circumstances.

Despite their strengths, parent's evenings also have limitations. Families who do not attend remain unheard, and feedback may be overly positive due to social pressure or a desire to avoid conflict. Difficult conversations may be avoided, and the method does not provide broad, quantifiable data that can be used for setting wide evaluation. Attendance may be lower for disadvantaged families or those with work commitments, meaning that the voices of the most vulnerable may again be underrepresented. However, parent's evenings can be adapted to improve accessibility by offering flexible appointment times, virtual or telephone alternatives, interpreters or creche facilities. These adaptations help ensure that parent's evenings are inclusive and reflective of the community.

A further limitation of both methods is that they rely heavily on adult perspectives. While parent's views are essential, they do not replace the need to capture the child's voice directly. The UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) and the ALN Code for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021) emphasise that children must be meaningfully involved in decisions that affect them. For younger children or those with ALN, alternative approaches such as talking mats, drawings, emotion faces or play based conversations can provide more genuine insight into their lived experiences. These child centred methods enhance questionnaires and parent's evenings by ensuring that children's perspectives are not filtered solely through adults.

Practitioner voice is another important dimension of quality assurance. Staff reflections gathered through supervision, peer observations or internal questionnaires provide insight into the challenges and strengths of daily practice. This aligns with Schon's reflective practitioner model, which emphasises the importance of reflecting both in and on action (Schon, 1983). Practitioners are uniquely positioned to identify barriers to quality, such as staffing pressures, environmental pressures or training needs. Including practitioner voice ensures that quality improvement is rooted in everyday practice rather than assumptions.

When comparing the two primary methods, questionnaires and parent's evenings, it becomes clear that each serves a different but complementary purpose. Questionnaires provide a broad picture, capturing whole setting trends and highlighting wider organisational issues such as communication gaps or concerns about routines. They are particularly useful for inspection frameworks such as CIW and Estyn, which expect settings to demonstrate how they gather and respond to feedback (Estyn, 2022). Parent's evenings, in contrast, offer depth, giving relationship centred, embedded insight into children's experiences and family circumstances. From a theoretical perspective, Vygotsky's emphasis on dialogue and shared meaning supports the value of parent's evenings, while Bronfenbrenner's ecological model supports the use of questionnaires to capture wider influences on the child. Bowlby's attachment theory supports both methods, as secure relationships underpin effective partnership and communication. Neither method is superior, their effectiveness depends on the purpose. For evaluating whole setting quality, questionnaires may be more effective, while for understanding individual children and building relationships, parent's evenings are more valuable. The strongest approach is to use both methods together, creating a fuller, more accurate picture of quality.

Both tools contribute to a cycle of continuous improvement. They help settings identify strengths and areas for development, such as communication, transitions, emotional wellbeing and curriculum experiences. They amplify the child's and family's voice, aligning with UNCRC Article 12 (UNICEF, 1989), the ALN Code for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021) and Birth to 5 Matters (2021), all of which emphasise child centred practice and the importance of listening to children and

families. The information gathered through these methods informs staff training and professional development. For example, if parents highlight concerns about behaviour, staff may receive training in co regulation or if children express anxiety about transitions, routines may be adapted. These tools also support reflective practice, aligning with Schon's reflective practitioner model. Furthermore, they provide evidence for inspection and accountability, demonstrating that the setting is committed to continuous improvement. Effective leaders use this feedback to inform strategic planning, ensuring that quality improvement is embedded across the setting rather than confined to scattered areas of practice.

Ethical considerations are also essential. Families must feel confident that their feedback will be treated respectfully and confidentially, and that their contributions will lead to meaningful change rather than something that doesn't lead anywhere. Ensuring transparency about how feedback is used strengthens trust and reinforces the collaborative nature of early years partnerships.

In conclusion, using a combination of questionnaires and parent's evenings enables early years settings to gather both broad and deep insights into the quality of provision. These tools, grounded in early childhood theory and supported by UK policy, help practitioners understand the lived experiences of children and families, identify areas for improvement and drive meaningful change. When used reflectively, ethically and consistently, they contribute to a culture of continuous improvement, ensuring that provision remains responsive, inclusive and centred on the needs of every child.

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