

Part 2 Reflective Paper

In this reflective paper, I will be reflecting on quality in early years settings. I will attempt to define what quality is and consider why quality is important. I will also analyse different methods and tools early years settings can use to ensure quality.

According to Harvey and Green (1993), there is no single definition of quality in the early years. Reed and Walker (2015) and Moss (2014) agree that the concept of quality is contested and complex, and Birthto5Matters (2025) states that quality as it is experienced by the child should be the prime concern of early years practitioners.

There are several stakeholders concerned with quality in the early years; children, their parents or carers, practitioners, leaders and managers, as well as the wider community and government (Campbell and Lesson, 2016; Cottle and Alexander, 2012).

Each stakeholder will have their opinion on what quality looks like in the early years, depending on their perspective, and their own method for measuring quality. The Government measures quality through inspections carried out by Ofsted. According to Mathers et al. (2012), parents often favour provisions where they feel that their child is nurtured, with Ofsted judgements being less paramount.

Despite not having a single definition of quality in the early years, several academics have agreed that there are two dimensions to quality in the early years; structural quality, which relates to leadership, and process quality, which relates to pedagogy (Birthto5Matters, 2025; Bonetti and Brown, 2018; Early et al., 2007; The Education Policy Institute, 2018; Harvey and Grenn, 1993; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2019; Slot et al., 2015; Sylva et al., 1999.).

According to the Education Policy Institute (2018) high-quality childcare provision can generate significant and sustained improvements in child outcomes. Ofsted (2024) agrees that there are benefits for children in receiving a high quality education, and specifically highlights the importance for vulnerable children or children from disadvantaged backgrounds, Demie and Mclean (2015) agree that early education is particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and discuss methods for 'narrowing the achievement gap'. The Department for Education (2022) states that one of the main aims of early years foundation stage is to improve outcomes for children. The Early years statutory framework (2024), which is statutory guidance for all providers, states that the framework seeks to provide quality as well as consistency, so that every child makes good progress.

I will be analysing how in addition to ensuring settings meet the statutory requirements; as set out in the Childcare Act (2006), the Early Years Statutory Framework (2024), the Childcare (General Childcare Register) Regulations (2008), the Equality Act (2010), and Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023), Ofsted; the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, with responsibility for inspecting all education and care settings in England (UK Government, no date), promotes and ensures quality above the statutory requirements.

According to the Early Years Inspection Handbook (2024), providers on the Early Years Register will be inspected at least once within a 6-year window, and sooner if the provider was not previously judged to be good or outstanding. Ofsted do have the power of entry under Section 77 of the Childcare Act (2006) and inspect every aspect of a setting to ensure the statutory requirements are being met and that all children are receiving a quality education. Inspections can occur as infrequently as every six years though, meaning that providers are not scrutinised for some time, unless a complaint or incident triggers a sooner inspection. The ability to inspect every aspect of a setting is beneficial for ensuring quality, but the potential infrequency of inspections is a weakness in ensuring quality. New staff, new management, or the setting falling into disrepair could occur in the period between inspections.

According to Snelling (2002) Ofsted inspections provide limited improvement to teaching quality. Robert-Holmes (2015) found that early years teachers are increasingly constrained by the need to ensure that children succeed with specific testing regimes. Snelling (2002) and Chapman (2010) discuss the potentially negative impact of inspections on staff. Ofsted (2019) acknowledges that Ofsted inspections can cause stress for practitioners.

Another potential disadvantage of quality assurance schemes such as Ofsted is that if they are not regularly reviewed to reflect current best practice, they may no longer be effective. According to Tanner et al., (2006) such systems present quality in early years provision as fixed and objective. Obtaining a good or an outstanding grading by Ofsted may lead practitioners to become complacent (Campbell-Barr, 2009; Mathers et al., 2012).

I will also be analysing how environmental rating scales, such as the Leuven scale can help to promote quality in early years settings. The Leuven scale is a five point scale, that practitioners can use to measure a child's involvement and wellbeing in the setting. The Leuven scale was developed at Leuven University by Ferre Laevers. High levels of emotional wellbeing promote self-esteem and resilience, skills that promote learning, and high levels of involvement indicate that learning is taking place. Laevers (2015) explains how quality can be promoted, through adopting 'the Ten Action Points', which are ten types of initiatives that favour wellbeing and involvement (Laevers, 1997). The ten action points include rearranging the learning environment, replacing materials, observing children's interests and encouraging them, introducing activities and providing support and targeted interventions. One of the overarching principles of the Early years statutory framework (2024) is that every child is unique, and that they learn best when adults respond to their individual interests in an enabling environment.

The Leuven scale is based on putting the child at the centre of their learning, and using observation to best support the child. The non-statutory guidance; Birth to 5 Matters states that practitioners can best support children's learning by starting from the child and using observation to plan learning activities. Practitioners can encourage children's

schemas, or repeated patterns of behaviour to support their individual learning (Thomas and Jones, 2020).

A potential disadvantage of environmental rating scales, such as the Leuven scale is that this approach is very dependent on practitioner skills and knowledge. The practitioner must be skilled at observing and have the necessary knowledge to interpret how to respond.

Another potential disadvantage of using the Leuven scale may be that it does not take into account children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities, who may not display typical behaviour.

In conclusion, there are various methods and tools that early years settings can adopt to promote quality above the statutory requirements. Each method or tool has advantages and disadvantages, and one method or tool is probably not sufficient to adopt in isolation. Leaders need to adopt the methods and tools that allow their practitioners to best support their children and families, and be vigilant to ensure that these processes are still the best for their individual setting.

There is a wealth of research which agrees that effective and inspirational leadership is key for ensuring the quality of a setting (Aubrey, 2007; Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016; Georgeson et al., 2014; Lindon and Lindon, 2011; Rodd, 2006; Sylva et al., 2004.), so in conclusion, effective leadership that adopts the most appropriate methods is the best way to ensure quality in an early years setting.

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