

AI Cover Sheet

I acknowledge the use of Copilot and ChatGPT to search for references and research in relation to this module.

I used the prompts:

Please find me references for the last 10 years in relation to Quality Assurance within early years in Wales include government legislation and policies, and research papers into both SSTEW and ECERS-3

Section 2 Reflective Paper

Dahlberg *et al*, (2013) suggest that quality is something that everyone aspires to possess and provide, but quality itself is taken for granted as something objective, real, and knowable.

Quality in early childhood provisions plays a significant role in determining children's developmental outcomes. Research has shown that high-quality provision within an early year setting enhances a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Melhuish *et al*, 2015).

In Wales, national policy frameworks, such as the Curriculum for Wales, the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare, and the Flying Start Childcare guidance, highlight the expectations for delivering high-quality provision for 2–3-year-olds (Welsh Government, 2026). A central tool for this is the Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS). This is a statutory tool used by the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) to monitor, evaluate and plan the regulations for childcare and play settings across Wales. The Care Inspectorate Wales will inspect and, if necessary, act on provisions that do not meet the required standards (CIW, 2026). The importance of embedding quality in early childhood education is heavily influenced by what adults pay attention to and do within

their settings. Each practitioner has the potential to advance a child's personal, social and intellectual development (Tayler, 2015). The assessment of quality in early years education is an essential part of ensuring that children's educational experiences are of high quality (UNICEF, n.d).

In Early childhood education, quality is assessed through a combination of two elements: process quality and structural quality (Birth to 5 Matters, 2025). Structural quality refers to effective practice, including ratios and physical environment, staff qualifications and policies. Slot, (2018) and Siraj *et al.*, (2015) state that process quality focuses on lived experiences, for instance, adult-child interactions, sustained shared thinking. Research carried out by Melhuish & Gardiner, (2019) demonstrates that process quality is strongest and underpins the Welsh Government's emphasis on nurturing our learners to become capable, curious learners (Welsh Government, 2022).

However, Eadie, (2021) states that the quality of care in early childhood education varies, and that quality should be organised into 3 categories: structural, process and system. Both Vgostsky, (1978), Sociocultural theory and Bronfenbrenner (2007), ecological theory are powerful frameworks that support settings to move beyond just compliance and into high-quality child-centred teaching. Vygotsky's theory supports practitioners in understanding that quality is not just about resources; it is also about interactions within your setting, sustained shared thinking and responsive teaching, which aligns with Flying Starts Language-rich practices (Welsh Government, 2024).

However, provisions within socio-economically disadvantaged areas find that access to high-quality, enriched learning environments is reduced, along with social and language-rich interactions that high-quality provisions can achieve (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022).

The Welsh Government's Flying Start programme is designed to address these inequalities by providing high-quality childcare to the most disadvantaged areas (Welsh Government, 2026). In a recent survey by the Administrative Data Research ADR Wales, (2023) found that children with higher attendance in Flying Start childcare were more likely to meet expected outcomes. This further suggests that having consistent access to high-quality provision can aid in developmental progress.

Although regulatory frameworks such as CIW and National Minimum Standards (NMS) provide the necessary baselines for safety, staffing and operational practice (CIW, 2023). However, statutory requirements alone cannot guarantee the depth of quality. Although compliance can ensure that a setting is safe and has the required number of staff, it does not ensure that children's experience is rich in interactions and that the areas of learning are rich in curiosity and learning (Slot, 2018). To monitor these outcomes further, many settings additionally adopt quality assurance tools to evaluate and strengthen their practice.

Two quality assurance tools that are commonly used are Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWS) Scale, and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-3). Both methods are used for assessing both the environment and the quality of adult-child interactions (Siraj et al., 2015). These tools provide a shared approach to reflection, support staff development and help to identify areas for improvement within their provisions. These methods of observing and recording quality align with the Welsh Government's emphasis on reflective, evidence-informed practice (Welsh Government, 2026).

The SSTEWS scale focuses on Sustained Shared Thinking, which is a collaborative process that involves both adults and children working together to solve problems. The ECERS focus is designed for children aged 2.5–5 years to ensure that activities, interactions, and environments within the provision support and enhance a child's development, thereby ensuring that the setting meets the highest standards (Pacey, 2025). SSTEWS's focus on process quality, which researchers consistently find to be the most effective indicator of children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, is one of its main advantages (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2019; Slot, 2018). Compared to methods that focus on resources or the environmental structure, SSTEWS looks at the quality of adult interaction and the extent to which practitioners scaffold children's thinking. According to ADR Wales (2023), this is especially important for Flying Start settings where many children present with speech and language delays. This method's

emphasis on language- rich- interactions supports practitioners to develop a high-quality relational understanding needed to successfully address these demands.

According to Pascal and Bertram (2021), another strength of SSTEWS is the value for professional development. It enables teams to analyse practice together and identify areas of improvement. This is consistent with Care Inspectorate Wales ' requirement that settings exhibit strong systems for self-evaluation and ongoing improvement.

SSTEWS's emphasis on visible interactions makes it easier for practitioners to explain their teaching choices during inspection, boosting confidence and reducing the risk of performative compliance.

This is consistent with CIW's need for settings that exhibit strong systems for self-evaluation and ongoing improvement. SSTEWS's emphasis on visible interactions makes it easier for practitioners to explain their teaching choices during inspections, boosting confidence and reducing the likelihood of performative compliance.

However, SSTEWS also has several disadvantages. One challenge is that the level of skill needed to use the tool consistently presents as one difficulty, as observers must be trained to accurately interpret the indicators, which can become problematic if practitioners are not experienced with observation-based assessment; scoring can become subjective (Siraj *et al* 2015). Another limitation is that the tool can be time-consuming, as high-quality SSTEWS observations require extended periods of intense observation followed by reflective discussion and action planning. It can also be difficult to find a safe time for this level of observation in a busy early year's environment. Especially settings that support children with additional needs (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). This is when SSTEWS can risk becoming a one-time exercise rather than a sustained tool for improvement. Despite these limitations, SSTEWS remains a very useful tool for improving process quality in early years settings, with its emphasis on sustained shared thinking, emotional well-being and responsive teaching is highly competitive.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Third Edition (ECERS-3) is one of the most popular and widely used tools for assessing quality within an early year setting. This method, which was developed by Harms, Clifford and Cryer (2015) Assesses a wide range of environmental elements, such as furnishings, space, language, literacy, interactions and learning activities. It is widely used for quality assurance throughout the UK due to its comprehensive qualities. Furthermore, Harms *et al* (2015) point out its validity across multiple countries, making it a strong tool for benchmarking quality. In addition, ECERS-3 has been used in both research and professional development to support settings in assessing the quality of their learning environment, complementing the relational tools such as SSTEW (Sylva *et al*, 2020). One key focus to consider with ECERS-3 is on structural and environmental quality, which research indicates is one of its main advantages for supporting children's engagement, independence and learning (Slot, 2018). The tool offers detailed indicators that assist practitioners in assessing the richness of the learning environments, accessibility and organisation. This is especially important within a flying start provision where high-quality settings can reduce barriers for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Welsh Government 2026).

However, ECERS-3 also has several limitations; one critique is that it can have too much focus on environmental features, sometimes to the detriment of deeper teaching methods. While the tool does have indicators that focus on interactions, its main emphasis remains on physical environment and routines. As stated earlier, research suggests that although structural quality is important, it is process quality that provides the strongest impact on children's development (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2019).

Another drawback to ECERS-3 is the tool's compatibility with different cultures and contextual fit. As the tool was developed in the US, some indicators represent American assumptions. Because of this, some criteria do not align with Welsh teaching approaches, especially those that are influenced by outdoor, relational and child-led philosophies (Moss, 2020). For instance, the holistic, experiential and inquiry-led methods that are promoted within a Welsh early year's setting may not be reflected in ECERS-3, which heavily emphasises materials, structured learning and adult-led

activities. Furthermore, this can lead to additional pressure on practitioners who feel pressured to adapt their environment to meet the tool's criteria rather than following their own teaching principles. Because of this pressure, it runs the risk of becoming a checklist-driven tool. Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) believe that when quality tools are used for accountability or inspection preparation, this can lead to performative behaviours rather than authentic improvements being made within the setting.

Despite these limitations, ECERS-3 remains a valuable tool for assessing environmental quality; its international reliability and focus on accessible, well-organised settings make it a useful tool. When used collaboratively, both ECERS-3 and SSTEW can create a culture where staff feel safe to question, reflect and grow within their setting.

Alongside research-based tools, there are sector-specific quality assurance schemes that play an important role in strengthening early years provision. Schemes such as Mudiad Meithrin's Quality Assurance Framework and PACEY Cymru's Quality Standards for Childminders. These schemes are shaped by the Children's Act 2006, the Wales Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 and the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare (Welsh Government, 2021). Although these schemes are not statutory requirements, they are used widely as they align with the Welsh Government's priorities around reflective practice, safeguarding and inclusion.

For example, Mudiad Meithrin's framework focuses on Welsh medium teaching, cultural belonging and community engagement, which are all elements that are supported by the Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 strategy (Mudiad Meithrin, 2020). Similarly, PACEY Cymru's standards promote high-quality home-based childcare through professional development and self-evaluation, while also adhering to national policy expectations (PACEY Cymru, 2019). Furthermore, both these schemes offer culturally relevant scales as opposed to international rating scales, by supporting a setting to embed Welsh language and culture within their ethos.

Finally, one conclusion that can be drawn from this reflection paper is that early years' provisions require more than just meeting statutory requirements to enable them to deliver high-quality provision. It must demand reflection and evidence-informed approaches that prioritise children's lived experiences, relationships and development outcomes. While National Minimum Standards (NMS) and Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) inspections provide an essential baseline for safety and compliance, they do not cover relational, interactional and contextual areas of quality that research can identify.

Additionally, it is important to note that Quality Assurance schemes and tools play a vital role in strengthening practice way beyond just compliance. Making sure that provisions remain child-centred, inclusive and developmentally responsive.

While professional development and staff reflections are paramount to enable consistency and a shared understanding of the need to go beyond compliance and provide a setting that is fully engaging with both adult and child interactions, enabling children to meet their developmental needs to their full potential.

Furthermore, for Flying Start settings where inspection preparation and child outcomes are critical, adopting a combination of research-based and sector-specific quality assurance tools offers a strong, holistic approach, ensuring high quality throughout.

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