

AI Statement

I acknowledge the use of Google Scholar (Available at: <https://scholar.google.co.uk/>) for the purpose of research for Module 15 – Leadership and management for systems of quality (ECEY6011).

I acknowledge the use of COPILOT to find current sources (e-books, journal articles, webpages), dated between 2015 and 2025 for the purpose of research for Module 15 - Leadership and management for systems of quality (ECEY6011).

I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Prompts:

- Definition of quality in early years education
- Why is quality important in early years education
- How do we know this?
- ECERS- A method to quality assure
- Stakeholders Questionnaires – a method to quality assure
- What information does ECERS give us and what don't they give us
- What information does questionnaires give us and what don't they give us
- Triangulation as a method of quality assurance and why adopt this
- Is there critique for ECERS?
- Is there critique for questionnaires?

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- **Part 2** – Reflection Paper. Pages 3-9
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Part 2 – Reflection Paper.

This section will reflect on the benefits of additional methods of promoting and ensuring quality beyond statutory requirements, followed by a critical analysis of two quality assurance approaches.

What is quality?

Quality in early childhood education and care is widely recognised as multifaceted and multilayered, shaped by varying perspectives, values and experiences across the early years sector (McLean *et al.*, 2023). Arndt and Tesar (2016) adopt a post-humanist view, suggesting that quality is not solely defined or controlled by humans but emerges through the interactions between people, materials, spaces and routines. This challenges the idea that quality can be captured through human centred or structural measures. National frameworks and regulatory bodies in Wales, however, emphasize that structural systems related to environment, qualifications, staffing and safeguarding form the minimum foundations for quality and compliance (CIW, 2023; Welsh Government (WG), 2023). Pascal and Bertram (2018) highlight the importance of structured processes such as self-evaluation and improvement planning as a way of evidencing and maintaining high-quality practice. However, Urban *et al.* (2015) warns that trying to define and measure quality through assessment tools and frameworks can ignore context, diversity and the relational nature of early years practice. Osgood (2006), as cited in Early Years Coalition (2025), recognises that structural systems can assure some aspects of quality, however the relational and lived experiences of quality that children and families have are shaped by the unique context of each setting. This aligns with perspectives that believe quality is socially constructed through relationships, values, and pedagogical approaches that underpin practice (Dahlberg *et al.* 2013; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002). Overall, these perspectives highlight the interconnectedness of many elements that shape quality in the early years. Therefore, it is best to view quality in early years education and care as a continuous journey, shaped through interactions, embedded pedagogy and statutory processes that collectively support children's learning, wellbeing and relationships (Bonetti and Brown, 2018; Osgood, 2006). (321)

Why is quality important?

The first years of life are recognised as a critical period for children's brain development and can establish patterns that influence lifelong development, learning, health, behaviour and wellbeing (Walsh *et al.* 2024). National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) emphasize that early development is shaped by the interaction between children's biology, their early experiences, quality of early relationships and that well-timed early support can improve developmental outcomes. High-quality early years provision is therefore important because it directly strengthens children's developmental foundations and shapes children's future learning, health and wellbeing (Public Health Wales, 2024). Wales has adopted a rights-based approach grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), placing duty on early years providers to ensure children access high-quality education and care that supports their development, wellbeing and best possible start in life (UNCRC, 1989; WG, 2021), demonstrating the importance of quality in raising outcomes. Whitebread *et al.* (2015) similarly emphasize that high-quality early years environments support children's cognitive, emotional and social development. Evidence shows that high-quality provision produces sustained and meaningful improvements in children's outcomes, helping to reduce inequalities and narrow gaps that emerge later in life (Local Government Association, 2023). Ofsted (2024) also highlight that high- quality early education is important for disadvantaged children, increasing their life chances, widening their capacity for learning and supporting greater confidence and independence for those identified with additional needs. McAleavy *et al.* (2023) further argue that while access to early years provision is increasing internationally, expanding availability alone is insufficient; it is the quality of early education that most effectively supports children's wellbeing, strengthens skills for later life and promotes more equitable outcomes across communities. Government frameworks such as The Best Start in Life highlight that early education plays a vital role in children's development and stress the importance of high-quality provision in future attainment, health and happiness. (Department for Education, 2025). (329)

How do we know it is important for children to have access to high quality settings?

Longitudinal research demonstrates that access to high-quality early years provision has lasting impacts on children's learning, development and life chances. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study showed that high-quality early education improves cognitive and social outcomes particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Sylva *et al.* 2004). The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) study further identified that pedagogical practices such as sustained shared thinking, skilled adult to child interactions and child led learning supported by adults are linked to improved developmental outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002). More recently, evidence from the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) demonstrated that access to high quality early education between the ages of two and four was linked with improved Key Stage Two outcomes, especially in reading, demonstrating early experiences can have a sustained effect on later attainment (Crowley *et al.* 2025)). SEED also found that access to high quality education was more beneficial for children from disadvantaged families, suggesting that high quality early years settings play a role in reducing inequalities and narrowing the attainment gap. However, earlier SEED analysis highlighted the role of the home environment as the most influential factor in shaping outcomes for children (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2017).

Hobbs and Mutebi (2020) reported that while high-quality settings can deliver long-term benefits, the evidence of actual impact is mixed when quality is inconsistent, with policy pressure and the COVID-19 pandemic placed additional strain on the sector. International evidence reinforces these findings, arguing that high-quality early education lays the foundations for language, literacy and numeracy and is one of the most effective ways to close the attainment gap. However, it also emphasizes this alone cannot compensate for wider structural inequalities and that reducing these gaps requires investment across the whole early childhood system, including family support, health, housing and community services (OECD, 2021).

In Wales, national policy reflects the importance of high-quality early education through its rights-based approach, embedding the UNCRC across all early year's frameworks positioning children rights, wellbeing and participation at the centre of practice (WG, 2022). This national investment in the early years, including the

expansion of Flying start, demonstrates WG'S commitment to ensuring children access high-quality provision. It is a recognition that the early years are foundation for children's later outcomes and life chances (WG, 2019). (407) (1056)

Additional methods of quality assurance.

This section will now critically analyse the benefits of additional methods to promote and ensure quality above statutory requirements, as well as examine two specific methods: the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) and stakeholder questionnaires. By exploring their methodological differences, the types of information they provide, and their strengths and limitations, this section highlights how each contributes to continuous quality improvement.

CIW (2023) inspections ensure settings comply with statutory requirements set out in the Childminding for Regulated Childcare (Wales) Regulations (2010) and the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare (WG, 2016). However, statutory inspection provides a minimum baseline of quality and focuses on compliance, documentation and regulatory safety. To strengthen quality beyond these requirements there are a wide range of methods and tools to support settings to evaluate and improve practice. By using a combination of structural and process focused tools alongside relational and perspective based tools settings can gain a holistic understanding of quality. This mixed method approach reduces the risk of bias, avoiding compliance-driven cultures and captures aspects of provision statutory frameworks overlooks, such as childrens lived experiences, wellbeing and relational pedagogy (Moss, 2016). This ensures a more accurate measure of practice and quality and ensures that children experience environments that are safe, nurturing and developmentally rich (Early Years Coalition (n.d.).

Method 1 – ECERS

ECERS was developed by Harms, Clifford and Cryer (1980) and is an established quality assurance tool designed to assess environmental and pedagogical quality in early years settings. It provides a structured framework for evaluating areas such as learning, self-regulation, staff child interaction and health and safety. (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2019; Alpys *et al.* 2025). This supports settings to measure their practice consistently and identify areas for improvement, driving quality in both structural and procedural aspects.

Method 2 – Stakeholder Questionnaires.

Stakeholder questionnaires gather feedback from parents, carers, staff and sometimes children. They offer insight into perceptions of quality, communication, relationships and satisfaction with provision. They are useful for capturing subjective experiences and relational aspects of quality that structured observational tools such as ECERS cannot identify (CIW, 2023; OECD, 2021). This supports settings to drive relational quality and provides information structural and procedural frameworks do not provide.

Compare and contrast.

Both ECERS and stakeholder questionnaires aim to support quality assurance however they differ in reliability and the type of information they provide. ECERS is a structural observation tool designed to provide objective, standardised data, enabling settings to measure quality across key domains of early years practice (Harms *et al.* 2015). It has gained an international reputation and has been validated through research as a measure of reliable early years quality (Siraj *et al.* 2015). This reliability is demonstrated by the EPPE study where ECERS scores could be linked to children's outcomes (Slyva *et al.* 2004). However, it relies on observations providing only a snapshot of practice which may not reflect the children's lived daily experience of the setting (Mathers *et al.* 2014). It also prioritises the physical and structural aspects of the setting environment and misses the relational pedagogy, and children's wellbeing (Wall *et al.* 2015; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2019).

In contrast stakeholder questionnaires provide subjective, perception-based data shaped by individual experiences, expectations and emotions. They offer insight into the relational and experiential aspects of quality like communication, belonging and partnership, which national guidance identifies as components of high-quality provision, but which structured tools like ECERS do not capture (WG, 2023; OECD 2021). Questionnaires also gather multiple perspectives supporting Welsh policy priorities relating to collaboration, and stakeholder voices (WG, 2023) and align with participatory approaches that emphasize the importance of lived experience in evaluating quality (Pascal and Bertram, 2018). However, they are less reliable than structural observations such as ECERS and can be influenced by bias, including the halo effect, social desirability or performative response where stakeholders report

what they think the setting wants to hear rather than their true experiences (McCambridge *et al.* 2014).

Additionally, ECERS has been critiqued around reflecting a Westernised view of quality, meaning it does not capture culturally diverse or community embedded practice (Alps *et al.* 2025). Bradbury (2019) argues that the tool is outdated and does not align with contemporary relational, rights based or wellbeing focused approaches to early education. While stakeholder questionnaires offer insight to family and staff perspectives and can reflect cultural expectations and community values (Pascal and Bertram, 2018), neither method represents children's own experiences. Capturing these perspectives requires child-centred approaches (Clark, 2017).

However, to improve provision settings require information about both structural and process quality as well as insights about the relational and pedagogical aspects of their practice. Structural information includes the organisation of the environment, routines and resources, interactions and health and safety practices. However, structural measures alone do not capture the relational and interactional pedagogy that Cliffe and Solvason (2023) emphasize are central to learning. Process information relates to children's lived experiences, wellbeing, involvement and relationships including multi-agency collaboration processes. By using ECERS and stakeholder questionnaires the settings gather evidence across these different domains, enabling them to evaluate quality holistically and identify areas for development. This combined information feeds directly into SASS and setting improvement plans, supporting a structured and accountable approach to ongoing quality development (WG, 2022; CSSIW, 2016b).

By using ECERS and stakeholder questionnaires as additional methods of promoting quality assurance beyond statutory requirements, settings can strengthen reflective practice by identifying strengths and areas for development (WG, 2022). ECERS supports structural and pedagogical consistency (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2019), while questionnaires highlight relational and experiential aspects of quality (Pascal and Bertram, 2018; OECD, 2021). Together, they provide holistic insights that inform improvement plans, feed into regulatory processes such as SASS (CIW, 2023; CSSIW, 2016b), and enable settings to respond to the needs of families. This enhances partnership working, reduces compliance-driven practice and supports

the delivery of consistent high-quality early years education during the foundational stages of children's development. Buckley *et al.* (2020) highlight quality assurance processes lead to improvements in provisions emphasizing structured methods enhancing service quality and child outcomes. Pascal and Bertram (2018) emphasize that triangulated approaches are important for capturing the complex nature of early years practice; however even triangulation requires child centred methods to ensure children's views meaningfully inform quality improvement processes (Clark, 2017).

Conclusion

In conclusion any method of quality assurance has advantages and disadvantages, highlighting the need for a multi-method, triangulated approach that also emphasize the children's voices. Structural tools like ECERS cannot capture the lived experience of the children and families, while perception-based tools like questionnaires cannot measure the process quality of the setting. Triangulation enables settings to combine objective and subjective information, gaining a more holistic understanding of the quality. This aligns with WG priorities around collaboration, child- centred practice and continuous improvement, supporting reflective practice and encourages practitioners to critically evaluate evidence from a range of sources. This approach ensures quality is improvement driven rather than compliance driven and strengthens high-quality early years services that supports better outcomes for children.

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