

Quality in early years childcare and education is not just a desirable goal, it is a fundamental necessity that shapes a child's cognitive, social and emotional development. Research consistently highlights the profound impact of high quality early education. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study reveals that children who attend high quality early years settings demonstrate significantly better outcomes in literacy, numeracy and social skills (Sylva et al., 2004). Similarly, the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) indicates that early years education positively affects children's educational, cognitive, behavioural and social outcomes, especially when the quality is high (Department for Education, 2020). However, defining quality remains a contentious issue, as it is influenced by varying perspectives, cultural expectations and policy agendas. What one stakeholder considers high quality may differ from another's view, making it a complex and evolving concept.

This essay critically examines the definition of quality in early years settings and its significance for child development. It will explore how high quality provision positively impacts children's long term outcomes and identify the challenges practitioners face in achieving excellence. Additionally, two key quality assurance methods will be analysed and compared to assess their effectiveness in improving early years practice. By reflecting on these aspects, this discussion will highlight the essential role of continuous improvement in shaping early childhood education and ensuring every child receives the best possible start in life.

Quality in early childhood education lacks a universal definition, as it is interpreted differently by various stakeholders, including parents, educators and policymakers. Scholars such as Moss (2016) argue that quality is subjective and context dependent, making it difficult to establish a fixed definition. The absence of a single definition reflects the complexity of early years education, where diverse cultural norms, expectations and goals shape perceptions of what constitutes quality. For example, policymakers may emphasize measurable outcomes such as school readiness and literacy levels, whereas parents might prioritize nurturing environments and emotional well-being. Educators, on the other hand, often view quality through the lens of pedagogy, child development and professional practice. Additionally, quality is influenced by national policies, economic conditions and social values, which vary across regions and societies. This fluidity highlights the need for adaptable frameworks that recognize different perspectives while ensuring that children receive high quality experiences that support their overall development.

Some definitions of quality focus on structural components, such as staff qualifications, child to adult ratios and physical resources. These structural elements are often easier to measure and are commonly used as benchmarks for assessing the quality of early years settings. For instance, research has shown that a lower child to adult ratio and highly qualified staff correlate with improved child outcomes in areas like language development and social skills (Sylva et al., 2004). However, these structural aspects alone do not capture the full picture of quality in early childhood education.

Other definitions emphasize process elements, which include the interactions between adults and children, the pedagogical approaches employed and the emotional well-being of children. According to the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study, the quality of adult and child interactions is one of the most significant factors influencing children's development, particularly in terms of cognitive and social outcomes (Sylva et al., 2004). Moreover, the emotional quality of early education settings, where children feel secure, valued and supported, plays a crucial role in fostering positive developmental outcomes (Department for Education, 2020).

In addition to structural and process factors, Cottle and Alexander (2014) argue that quality is inherently personal and may be influenced by individual priorities, experiences and expectations. For example, a parent might define quality based on the perceived safety and nurturing environment provided by the setting, while an educator may focus on the pedagogical strategies employed to promote learning. These differing perspectives make it challenging to arrive at a consensus on what constitutes high quality early years education. Therefore, while it is clear that quality encompasses both structural and process components, the subjective nature of its definition means that it is constantly evolving. What is considered high quality in one setting or culture may differ in another, influenced by changing societal values, policy shifts and evolving research. As such, understanding quality in early years education requires a unique approach that considers multiple factors and perspectives.

High quality early years provision in Wales is characterized by well trained staff, a nurturing environment and a curriculum that supports holistic development. The *Curriculum for Wales 2022* sets out the foundation for learning, emphasizing the importance of developing children's well-being, competence and confidence through a range of dynamic and flexible learning experiences (Welsh Government, 2022). Research demonstrates that skilled and reflective practitioners are key, as positive adult and child interactions significantly impacts children's cognitive, emotional and social development (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2017). The new curriculum in Wales introduces a child

centred, play based approach, promoting a focus on learning through exploration, creativity and real life experiences. Additionally, inclusive practices and continuous professional development are integral to ensuring high quality early years provision (Furlong et al., 2018). Furthermore, a well structured environment, rich in play based learning, fosters curiosity, engagement and emotional growth, essential for both academic and personal development (Whitebread, 2019). The role of leadership in early years settings remains central, with strong leadership supporting professional development, encouraging reflective practice and ensuring the consistent delivery of high quality care and education (Welsh Government, 2022).

One significant challenge in achieving high quality early years education is the issue of workforce retention. Research has shown that early childhood practitioners face low wages, limited career progression and heavy workloads, which contribute to high staff turnover in early years settings (Nutbrown, 2012). The issue of staff turnover is particularly concerning because high quality interactions between adults and children are vital to children's cognitive and social development. Research consistently shows that skilled, reflective practitioners can make a significant difference in children's learning experiences (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2017). However, without sufficient investment in workforce training, these interactions can be negatively impacted.

Furthermore, the limited recognition of early years practitioners as professionals is a contributing factor to workforce retention issues. The lack of a clear, consistent pathway for career development within early childhood education can discourage practitioners from pursuing long term careers in the sector. Higher pay, better benefits and professional recognition are critical to improving retention rates and ensuring that children consistently benefit from skilled and experienced educators (Bonetti, 2019).

Another issue that impacts the quality of early years education is the disparity in funding and resources available across different settings. While research has highlighted the importance of investing in high quality provision, financial constraints often lead to insufficient resources for staff training, learning materials or maintaining appropriate child to adult ratios (Simon et al., 2022). This inequality creates a divide between well resourced settings, which can provide rich learning environments, and those with fewer resources, which may struggle to meet the needs of children and families.

Funding disparities also exacerbate the problem of access to quality provision for disadvantaged children. Children from lower income families are often at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing high quality early education, which

further enhances the achievement gap (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2020). This highlights the need for equitable policies and targeted funding that can ensure that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have access to the same high quality early years education that supports their development.

High quality early childhood education has lasting benefits for children's academic, social and emotional development. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study found that children who attended high quality settings achieved better literacy, numeracy and social outcomes, with effects persisting into later education (Sylva et al., 2004). Similarly, longitudinal research highlights that early exposure to rich learning environments enhances cognitive development and self regulation skills (Melhuish et al., 2015). Crucially, skilled educators and positive adult and child interactions are key to fostering these outcomes, as effective pedagogy supports both intellectual growth and emotional resilience (Siraj et al., 2017). Moreover, high quality early years provision is particularly beneficial for disadvantaged children, helping to narrow the attainment gap and promote lifelong learning opportunities (Taggart et al., 2015). Investing in quality provision not only benefits individual children but also has long term societal advantages, including economic growth and improved social mobility, reinforcing the need for sustained policy support and funding.

However, a critical issue to providing high quality is the accessibility of quality provision, particularly for disadvantaged families. Socioeconomic inequalities mean that children from lower income backgrounds are less likely to access high quality settings, exacerbating the attainment gap (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2020). Without targeted policies to improve funding and workforce conditions, high quality early years education risks becoming a privilege rather than a universal right. Addressing these challenges requires long term investment, professional recognition and a policy framework that prioritizes quality over short term cost savings. Additionally, policy shifts and governmental demands create instability, with frequent changes to early years frameworks leaving practitioners under pressure to adapt without sufficient support (Pascal and Bertram, 2021).

Two widely used methods for assessing and enhancing quality in early years settings are the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) scale. Each provides a distinct perspective on early years provision, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of quality.

The ITERS-R (Harms, Cryer, and Clifford, 2006) is a structured environmental rating scale designed to evaluate various aspects of provision, including

interactions, resources and safety. It offers a standardized framework for assessing quality, helping practitioners identify specific areas for development (Burchinal et al., 2000). A key strength of ITERS-R is its reliability in measuring tangible aspects of the environment, such as space, materials and health practices (Slot, Leseman, and Mulder, 2015). However, critics argue that it places excessive emphasis on structural components and may overlook the complexities of child and adult interactions and emotional well-being (Gordon et al., 2013). Additionally, its structured nature may lead to a tick box approach rather than a deep engagement with pedagogical quality.

In contrast, the SSTEWS scale (Siraj et al., 2015) prioritizes the quality of adult and child interactions, particularly sustained shared thinking, a process where practitioners extend children's thinking through meaningful dialogue and questioning. SSTEWS recognizes the importance of emotional well-being in children's learning experiences and encourages reflective practice among educators (Melhuish et al., 2015). Research highlights the effectiveness of sustained shared thinking in promoting cognitive development, problem solving skills and deeper engagement in learning (Sylva et al., 2012). However, a key limitation of SSTEWS is its reliance on subjective interpretation, which may lead to inconsistencies in assessment and variation in practice depending on individual observer expertise (Bennett, 2014).

Quality in early years education is a complex and multi dimensional concept that plays a vital role in children's development and lifelong outcomes. While defining quality remains challenging due to its subjective nature, research emphasizes the importance of high quality provision in shaping children's cognitive, social and emotional well-being. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study (Sylva et al., 2004) and the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) (Department for Education, 2020) highlight the lasting benefits of high quality early education, particularly for disadvantaged children, reinforcing the need for well trained practitioners and enriching learning environments.

Despite these well documented advantages, achieving and maintaining high quality provision presents significant challenges. Workforce retention and professional development remain critical concerns, as financial constraints and policy shifts often hinder access to adequate training and career progression opportunities (Nutbrown, 2012). Without sustained investment, practitioners struggle to provide the level of interaction and support necessary for fostering children's holistic development. Additionally, disparities in funding and accessibility mean that high quality provision is not always available to all

children, intensifying inequalities in educational outcomes (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2020).

By implementing effective quality assurance methods, such as the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale - Revised (ITERS-R) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) scale, early years settings can assess and enhance their provision. While ITERS-R provides a structured evaluation framework, SSTEWS emphasizes the importance of relational pedagogy and sustained interactions. Integrating both approaches allows settings to develop a balanced and effective strategy for improvement, ensuring children receive the best possible early education experiences.

Ultimately, continuous reflection, professional development and a child centered approach are essential in maintaining high quality early childhood education. By addressing challenges and refining quality assurance measures, early years settings can ensure they provide enriching and equitable learning experiences that support children's long term success.

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