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Assignment: Leadership and Management for Systems of Quality.

Part 2: Strengthening Quality Through Multiple Lenses: A Critical Evaluation of Two Quality Assurance Approaches.

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AI Statement:

Throughout the duration of this assignment I acknowledge the use of the following

- <https://copilot.microsoft.com/chats/uWfmGxnT1d6Cv1bTnZhjv> using the following prompts:
 - To check my own text for grammatical and syntactical mistakes and for suggestions to rephrase my own work.
 - Find and summarise data in relation to Inspection frameworks and guidance, Welsh policy, ITERS and SSTEW.

Part 2:**Title: Strengthening Quality Through Multiple Lenses: A Critical Evaluation of Two Quality Assurance Approaches.**

Quality in the early years is a contested and subjective concept, different stakeholders value different aspects of provision and what counts as quality is shaped by the unique identity, values, relationships and purposes of each setting (Howard *et al.*, 2023). As Moss (2016) and Dahlberg *et al.* (2013) argue, quality is not a fixed or universal standard but a contextual, subjective, socially constricted, value laden concept. Dahlberg *et al.* (2013) describe quality as a sacred and taken for granted term that is often assumed to be objective, when in reality it is complex, political, negotiated and deeply influenced by cultural and pedagogical traditions. Moss (2016) similarly contends that quality is neither natural nor neutral and cannot be captured through a one size fits all criteria. Alternatively practitioners should focus on doing what they do exceptionally well within their own context. Treating quality universally risks silencing diversity, narrowing professional judgement and overlooking the relational, cultural and contextual dimensions that shape practice (Howard *et al.*, 2023).

Within a Welsh context, quality is framed through a rights based, child centred lens, emphasising children's wellbeing, voice and lived experiences as outlined in the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare (NMS) (Welsh Government [WG], 2023a). The *Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016* and the Child Minding and Day Care (Wales) Regulations 2010 further establish the statutory foundations for safe, ethical and developmentally appropriate practice, reinforcing that quality must be enacted through relational care, safeguarding and children's rights rather than procedural compliance alone. Collectively these frameworks position quality as relational, ethical and grounded in children's rights.

Eadie *et al.* (2022) demonstrates that high-quality early years provision emerges from the interaction of pedagogy, professional development, programmes and interventions and learning environments. This aligns directly with CIW's four areas of quality, where children's well being, care and development, the environment and leadership are understood as interconnected elements of high-quality practice (CIW, 2023). Together these perspectives position quality as a concept co-created through

reflective practice, dialogue and shared meaning, rather than imposed or measured through fixed criteria.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study strengthens this conceptual understanding of quality by demonstrating that high-quality early years provision is characterised by high-quality interactions, intentional pedagogy and a well qualified, reflective workforce (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002). The EPPE evidences that quality is not achieved through structural compliance alone but through enacted relational, reflective and research informed approaches that go beyond minimum expectations. Settings offering an ‘above and beyond’ approach, characterised by sustained shared thinking, language rich environments and confident knowledgeable practitioners achieve stronger cognitive and social outcomes for all children, particularly those experiencing disadvantage (Sylva *et al.*, 2004). These findings echo Dahlberg *et al.* (2013) and Moss (2016) who conceptualise quality as socially constructed, contextual and value laden, and directly support Welsh rights-based policy frameworks that position quality as emerging from ethical, relational and context specific practice rather than universal metrics.

Quality in early years provision is widely promoted across statutory and research literature, with strong evidence that high-quality environments support children’s safety, wellbeing and long term developmental outcomes (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; WG, 2023a). Statutory frameworks such as the National Minimum Standards (WG, 2023a) and the Quality of Care Report Guidance (CIW, 2025) emphasise that high-quality provision protects children’s rights, ensures consistent safeguarding and promotes equitable inclusive experiences. Research tools such as Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised (ECERS-R), Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Third Edition (ECERS – 3) and Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWS) attempt to operationalise quality in early years settings, with recent evidence showing that higher quality adult child interactions are associated with improved cognitive, social and educational outcomes (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Gordon *et al.*, 2015; Howard *et al.*, 2024).

High-quality practice in the early years benefits staff as much as it benefits children, though the nature of these benefits varies heavily depends on how quality is

conceptualised and measured (Urban *et al.*, 2018; Slot, 2018). Structural approach's to quality provide clear routines, organised environments and predictable expectations, which reduce ambiguity and workload while supporting professional confidence. However they can also intensify administrative workload and create pressure to perform for inspection rather than embed it meaningfully in practice (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Slot, 2018; Eadie *et al.*, 2022).

In contrast, interaction focused frameworks emphasise relational and pedagogical dimensions of quality, offering deeper professional satisfaction through meaningful engagement. However, they place greater reflective and emotional demands on practitioners which can be difficult to sustain in busy settings (Taggart, 2016; Siraj *et al.*, 2023). While structural quality can strengthen consistency and reduce uncertainty, interactional quality fosters professional identity, reflective practice and a sense of purpose (Slot, 2018; Eadie *et al.*, 2022). The Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) longitudinal study broadly aligns with these findings, demonstrating that emotionally supportive, high-quality interactions are stronger predictors of children's outcomes than structural features alone. However it also highlights that rating scales may underestimate the complexity of practice and the professional judgement required to sustain such interactions (Melhuish *et al.*, 2017). Howard *et al.* (2024) further demonstrate that high-quality adult child interactions not only improve children's developmental outcomes but also enhance staff wellbeing, motivation and staff growth, underscoring the reciprocal relationship between the quality environment and the practitioner experience. This aligns with Welsh policy context, where the National Minimum Standards emphasise that high-quality provision depends on skilled, supported and well led practitioners and that robust systems and reflective practice contribute to staff confidence, teamwork and wellbeing (WG, 2023a).

Furthermore statutory frameworks also offer limited practical detail on implementation, placing interpretive responsibility on setting leaders (OECD, 2017; WG, 2023b). Additional research cautions that rating scales can oversimplify pedagogy or can be misused in high stakes contexts, and that quality measures do not always function as intended, with several items failing to reliably capture the high-quality practice they are assumed to represent (Gordon *et al.*, 2015). Taken together, this shows that while quality is a statutory and ethical requirement the

sector must critically evaluate the tools used to define it, ensuring they support professional judgement, relational pedagogy and continuous improvement rather than narrowing practice.

Similarly when comparing the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) with the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWS) scale, both tools aim to assess quality in early years provision, however they differ markedly in their focus.

The ITERS is an internationally used, tangible, quality assessment tool designed to evaluate the care, environment and routines provided for children from birth to 30 months allowing comparison across settings and contributing to system level quality monitoring (Vermeer *et al.*, 2016; Slot, 2018). Although applied internationally, Vermeer *et al.* (2016) observed that across Europe Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), used to assess provision for children aged 2 years 6 months to 5 years, scores were consistently higher than ITERS scores, largely due to preschool environments aligning more closely with the Environment Rating Scales (ERS), the collective range of tools available, emphasise on materials, space and activity variety, whereas infant rooms are shaped by relational pedagogy, hygiene routines and tighter structural constraints.

ITERS focuses primarily on structural and environmental features of quality such as space, safety, hygiene, materials, routines and supervision, thus determining how well a setting supports the development and wellbeing in the early years and is often used as the point of reference for quality and improvement and regulatory monitoring (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, n.d.). Barros *et al.* (2016) suggest that ITERS can be particularly useful for assessing structural quality, especially routines, safety and organisations, both of which are foundational for children's wellbeing (Slot, 2018). Vermeer *et al.* (2016) further note that the ITERS provides clear, observable indicators that support staff reflection and environmental improvement with scores correlating strongly with practitioner sensitivity and demonstrating significant negative associations with child-practitioner ratios, resulting in high-quality when smaller ratios were in place (Blanden *et al.*, 2018; Slot, 2018).

However critically, using ITERS can create risks of compliance driven practice as it encourages a checklist approach rather than deep pedagogical reflection (Slot, 2018). It also places a heavy weight on the physical environment and routines and has limited sensitivity to interactional quality, meaning it may not capture the relational and emotional processes most predictive of child outcomes (Vermeer et, 2016; Slot, 2018). These limitations are compounded by cultural and contextual constraints, although used internationally, the scale reflects pedagogical assumptions rooted in North American early childhood models (Vermeer, 2016; Barros *et al*, 2016) that prioritise structured routines, hygiene practices and material provisions, features that do not always align with relational, culturally grounded or child led pedagogies found in other national contexts such as Te Whāriki, that emphasises cultural identity and belonging, whānau (family), partnership and holistic, emergent child led learning or Nordic early childhood practices that emphasise barnperspektiv (child perspective), and relational pedagogy (Tobin, 2016). Further concerns relate to the subjective nature of scoring, with studies showing significant variability between observers, raising questions about the reliability and validity of the ITERS (Neitzel *et al.*, 2019). Observational assessments are also vulnerable to the Hawthorne effect, where practitioner behaviours change simply by being observed, reducing the ecological validity of scores and can potentially inflate quality ratings (Hallgreen, 2015; Neitzel *et al.*, 2019). As a result high-quality environments shaped by national frameworks can score lower simply due to their pedagogical priorities. This is particularly relevant in Wales where the NMS and Curriculum for Wales emphasise responsive caregiving, relationships, children's rights and culturally situated practice all of which are only partially captured by ITERS (WG, 2023a; WG, 2022). These policy expectations highlight relational quality, wellbeing and practitioner judgement as core to high-quality provision, reinforcing the need for complementary tools such as SSTEW to provide a more balanced and contextually aligned assessment of quality.

Unlike ITERS, which is less sensitive to the nuanced interactional process, the SSTEW scale offers a more relationally attuned and pedagogically sensitive framework (Siraj *et al.*, 2023). SSTEW foregrounds the interactional processes that shape children's learning and wellbeing, including sustained shared thinking, emotional responsiveness and high-quality interactions, and is underpinned by

strong theoretical grounding in effective pedagogy drawn from the EPPE and Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) research base (Siraj et al., 2023). Melhuish and Gardner (2019) and Wyslowska and Slot (2020) demonstrate that process quality, interactions, emotional responsiveness and sustained shared thinking are the strongest predictor of children's learning and wellbeing, reinforcing the theoretical foundation underpinning SSTEW. This also provides more contemporary evidence that interaction focussed tools are more predictive of outcomes than structural checklists and reinforces the centrality of interactional quality for positive outcomes (Smidt and Embacher, 2023; Fiene, 2025).

Wyslowska and Slot (2020) also define that process quality actually shapes the children's experiences including the interactions, the atmosphere and the engagements they encounter. They also note that process quality has a clear differentiation between high, medium and low quality and is easier to interpret and reinforce the idea that interactional quality is the meaningful source of variation (Wyslowska and Slot, 2020). Furthermore Smidt and Embacher (2023) note that from a European and global perspective, structural features such as ratios, group size and material richness matter primarily due to the fact they enable high-quality interactions, reinforcing the intentional consensus that interactional process quality is central to children's learning and development with interactional quality as the heart of quality.

Critically Slot (2018) highlights that interaction based tools require high observer skill and like ITERS, can be vulnerable to different stakeholders subjectivity and variability in value of different aspects of provision and scoring (Slot, 2018; Howard et al., 2023). This reliance on observer interpretation further compounds the challenge of applying SSTEW consistently across diverse cultural and pedogeological contexts. The behaviours SSTEW prioritises, such as sustained shared thinking, verbal scaffolding and explicit emotional coaching, are not expressed uniformly across cultures or pedagogical traditions, with researchers highlighting that interactional norms vary widely and are culturally mediated (Tobin, 2016; Fleer, 2015; Lohmander, 2022). Western expectations of dialogue, co-construction and emotionally explicit interaction may sit in tension with local pedogeological norms, where high-quality engagement is instead communicated through non-verbal attunement, collective caregiving or observational learning. What

constitutes quality is therefore culturally situated, and tools such as SSTEW may inadvertently privilege particular Western forms of adult-child interaction over culturally grounded alternatives (Fleer, 2015; Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo, 2015; Lohmander, 2022).

Contextual priorities central to Welsh childhood practice, such as bilingualism, cultural story telling, community based learning and relational caregiving, may also be under-represented within the framework, despite their prominence in the Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2022) and the NMS (WG, 2023a) both of which position relationships, wellbeing and responsive pedagogy at the heart of high-quality provision. As such while SSTEW offers a theoretically grounded and pedagogically aligned tool for assessing the dimensions of quality most predictive of positive outcomes, its applicability must still be considered critically in relation to the cultural, linguistic and relational distinctiveness of the Welsh early years sector.

Taken together ITERS and SSTEW offer complimentary insights into early years quality, yet both are constrained by the inherent limitations of any single assessment tool (Barros *et al.*, 2016), reinforcing the need for professional judgement and a multi-method approach to truly capture the richness and complexity of early childhood practice.

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