

Leadership and Management in Systems of Quality

I acknowledge that I have not used any form of AI in this assignment.

Introduction

The term quality can be difficult to define due to its complexity within society (Harvey, 2024). Depending on the context, the term may be used to describe the standards of an object or product, comparing them to similar things within the same field (Atkinson, et al., 2010). It is also commonly used to describe a person's characteristics or traits (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). However, due to the contextual nature of the term, many believe that quality is a constructed concept which is based on perception and opinions (Moss, 2016). This means that each individual possesses their own idea of what high or low quality looks like, therefore, making it difficult to measure, standardise, and identify. Moss (2016) argues that quality must possess neo-liberal connotations. Further suggesting that by eliminating exterior political views, the essence of 'good' quality education and care may be deduced.

Ishimine and Tayler (2014) argue that in today's society, quality plays a key role in our childcare and educational systems. It is thought to be a particularly vital component of the early years sector as it creates the foundations for promoting continual development, learning, and well-being for both staff and children (McAleavy, et al., 2024). Furthermore, by setting high standards for regulated childcare, the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 emphasises the importance of service quality, improvement, and accountability in the early years sector. Moreover, MacDonald (2018) discusses the impact that quality has on pre-school children. They explain that high quality experiences boost children's learning and development outcomes, having a positive lifelong impact.

Education Policy Institute (2018) explains that there are two common types of quality within the early years, structural and process quality.

Structural quality refers to aspects or features of a setting that are considered to be more easily measurable, such as staff qualifications, teacher-pupil ratios, and classroom resources (Eadie, *et al.*, 2024). Ensuring staff have relevant qualifications,

knowledge, and legal documentation such as a DBS, is a mandatory process for all early years settings in Wales in ensuring both staff and children's safety.

Conversely, process quality focuses on the more difficult to measure features of practice (Education Policy Institute, 2018). It often concentrates on aspects of interactions and experiences within an ECEC setting that impacts children's well-being and development. Additionally, as supported by Slot, *et al.*, (2015), providing an enriching learning environment for children to learn and explore in is a key element of high process quality. According to Acar (2014), studies show that a lack of interaction with outdoor environments can have a substantial negative impact on children's physical and emotional well-being. Allowing children to have access to an inclusive, enriching, and interactive environment can reduce anxiety whilst promoting the development of their imagination and creative exploration skills (Bento and Dias, 2017).

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance can be described as a process which involves a culmination of policies, legislation, and practices. This concept was created to assist organisations and services to maintain, enhance, and exceed quality standards, such as those included within the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare (Williams, 2016). In relation to the early years sector, quality assurance offers a vast variety of tools to assist settings in assessing the quality of service that is offered to children and families (Bowyer, *et al.*, 2018).

Legislation, policies, and guidance, such as the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018, the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (2024), and Flying Start Guidance (2023b), it is the Welsh Government's ambition to ensure children's well-being, learning, and developmental journeys are prioritised through not only upholding but exceeding the National Minimum Standards.

As suggested by Welsh Government (2023a), quality is measured in the early years through various methods of evaluation and assessment. Early years institutions in Wales are required to partake in regular inspections, usually occurring every six months (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025). Inspectorate bodies such as Care Inspectorate Wales (2025) critically analyse both structural and process aspects of

setting provision, as well as compare and contrast the quality of service against relevant criteria, such as the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare (2023) (Dallimore, 2019). Therefore, as supported by Waltham Forest Council (2019), ensuring practitioners are up-to-date with the appropriate policies and procedures is of utmost importance in ensuring positive outcomes for the setting. However, as supported by MacDonald (2018), due to the fragmented nature of Wales' Early Childcare and Education Care (ECEC) policies and guidance, standards vary depending on the institute and age group of children in question. The abundance of differing standards required throughout the ECEC may make it challenging for practitioners to navigate through the process of provision assessment (Baldock, *et al.*, 2013).

In order to prevent such occurrences and exceed minimum standardisations, setting management should promote continual professional development for all early years staff (Social Care Wales, 2016). Professional development is a key aspect of providing high quality care for children (Egert, *et al.*, 2018). Understanding strengths and weaknesses in which one possesses can allow practitioners to identify areas that require support, training, and improvement. Siraj, *et al.*, (2019) explains that by pursuing continual training, practitioners are able to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to offer enhanced quality learning opportunities and environments that children are able to flourish in. Vygotsky's ZPD theory (1934) explores the concept of scaffolding in the early years, further explaining that children are able to experience higher levels of learning through interactions with supportive adults. Many early years settings implement the ZPD approach when assessing children's abilities, this enables practitioners to tailor both their practice and the environment to best fit children's needs. Additionally, staff that achieve higher levels of expertise through higher education or additional training courses, facilitates settings to surpass minimum requirements set by the Welsh Governments' NMS (2023) (Social Care Wales, No date). Furthermore, professional development equips practitioners with the tools needed to combat issues within daily practice and society, such as prejudice, safeguarding concerns, and financial difficulties (Brooker, *et al.*, 2010 & Dubiel, 2024).

Methodologies of Quality Assurance

According to UNICEF (no date), there are many methodologies of quality assurance in which inspectorate bodies and ECEC institutions use to gain an understanding or measurement of quality of service in the early years sector. Majority of quality assurance methods in the early years involve methods of self-evaluation, including both the SSTEW Scale and the Quality Counts Scheme (Eurydice, 2023). Self-evaluation is a critical process in which all practitioners should include within their practice (Brady, 2016). It refers to a process in which practitioners evaluate their way of practice. Identifying strengths and areas that require improvements leads to continual professional development (CPD), thus enhancing the quality of care provided to children. Additionally, an efficiently structured self-assessment can allow settings to better prepare for up-coming inspections and provide enriching high quality learning environments (Welsh Government, 2024b). However, as suggested by Karpen (2018), when not executed correctly, self-evaluation can facilitate the development of bias within a setting.

Observation is an additional method for measuring the quality of provision in ECEC (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2017). As supported by Welsh Government (2024c), opposed to self-evaluations, observations are often carried out by inspectorate bodies such as ESTYN or Ofsted, rather than internal practitioners. This addresses the potential bias problem that may occur from self-evaluation. Although, similarly to self-evaluation, observations can be thought of as a time consuming process which, due to the time pressures of education and childcare environments, can make it stressful and challenging for practitioners to navigate through (Butler, 2025).

As supported by UNICEF (2020), quality assurance systems that are well-constructed positively contribute to the way in which a setting operates. MacDonald (2018) discusses the divide between childcare and education systems in Wales, emphasising the urgency for policy and curriculum alignment. As supported by OCED (2022), quality assurance is particularly paramount for early intervention and identification of specific aspects that require additional support, and can have a substantial impact on the way policy and guidance is created and implemented within the early years sector.

However, there are a multitude of limitations to implementing quality and quality assurance in the early years sector (Richards, 2022). UNICEF (2019) suggests that

today's society is currently facing a problematic learning catastrophe. Due to a lack of quality settings, a substantial amount of children are starting their education journey with minimal literacy, numeracy, and cognitive thinking skills. Richter, *et al.*, (2017) links this issue to the increase of insufficient funding for Wales' early years sector. The Welsh Government (2017) discusses that more affluent areas of Wales have a higher number of childcare facilities, further implying that rural, deprived areas have a lack of access to high quality institutions. Backes (2018) Suggests that decreased funding has a substantial impact on setting's ability to maintain and implement quality assurance within childcare and educational settings. This may lead to non-compliance to statutory regulations such as the National Minimal Standards for Regulated Childcare in Wales (2023c), further resulting in a potential increase in setting closures (Welsh Government, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework, 2024). Additionally, as a result of financial difficulties, childcare settings within Wales are currently facing an increase of staff shortages (Early Years Alliance, 2021). Without a sufficient number of staff, settings are unable to adhere to statutory requirements for practitioner-child ratios, therefore, having a detrimental impact on the quality of a setting. Moreover, OCED (2022) discusses the risk for inconsistencies within quality assurance. Due to the reliance on what are considered to be subjective assessment methods, such as self-evaluation and observation, inspectorate bodies or early years staff may have different understandings of guidelines.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being (SSTEWS) Scale

As supported by Sefton Council (2024), the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being Scale (SSTEWS) is an observational tool that is utilised within early years environments for children two to five years old to assess the quality of practitioner-child interactions. As supported by Wieduqilt, *et al.*, (2023), the SSTEWS scale fixates on the role of the adult in facilitating education and children's holistic development.

As discussed by Siraj, *et al.*, (2015), the assessment method of the SSTEWS scale consists of five subsections which focuses on different aspects of development within a setting, such as, social and emotional well-being, building trust and confidence, and supporting critical thinking skills, language, and numeracy development. Each factor can then be rated on a seven point scale, allowing in-depth analysis' of practices. Overall, the SSTEWS scale is implemented within today's childcare system to

encourage self-reflection, professional development, and quality enhancement within ECEC settings (Howard, *et al.*, 2020).

Quality Counts (NDNA)

Quality Counts can be described as a scheme created by National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) (2025). Through the integration of policies, guidance, and statutory requirements, this scheme aims to assist nursery settings in improving the quality of provision, education, and care. Additionally, this framework was designed to unify staff within nursery settings to create a cohesive approach in achieving high levels of quality. Moreover, this provides reassurance to parents, knowing that their children are in safe, knowledgeable, and professional hands (NDNA UK, 2019).

There are noticeable differences between both the SSTEWS Scale and the Quality Counts scheme. For instance, the SSTEWS scale is a diagnostic tool, which primarily focuses on the quality of interactions and emotional support within a setting, whereas the Quality Counts is a developmental scheme which provides a wider range of guidance, encompassing many aspects of a nursery's dynamic, including staff training, health and safety, and parent partnerships. Overall, The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being Scale (SSTEWS) and the Quality Counts framework are both highly impactful, child-centred tools created to improve and promote quality within the early years sector (Sefton Council, 2024 & NDNA, 2025).

Conclusion

To conclude, 'quality' in the early years sector encapsulates the necessary standards and components of efficient and well-performing education and care processes. The criteria defining quality in the early years and education sector are continuously tailored through governing bodies via implemented policies and legislation. Additionally, research shows a strong correlation between high quality care and children's improved outcomes. Through the use of quality assurance methodologies, such as the SSTEWS Scale and the Quality Counts scheme, practitioners are able to identify potential strengths and weaknesses of daily practice, creating and refining enriching learning environments and better supporting children's holistic development in line with set policies and legislations. Further permitting settings to exceed the Welsh minimum standards implemented by governing bodies.

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