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Critical Reflection

Introduction

Quality within early years provision is mainly recognised as a vital factor in supporting children's development, wellbeing, and long-term outcomes. In Wales, statutory requirements set by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), as supported by Care Inspectorate Wales (2021), establish that all childcare settings must meet to ensure children are safe, cared for, and supported appropriately. These regulations provide consistency and accountability across settings; however, they represent a minimum standard rather than a measure of excellence. As a result, many early years providers want to go beyond these set expectations by using additional methods of quality assurance.

This reflective paper will critically explore the benefits of ensuring quality above statutory requirements. It will also critically analyse key methods of quality assurance, with a focus on the Early Years Wales Quality for All Mark, Environment Rating Scales (ERS), and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS). Furthermore, the discussion will incorporate theories of reflection, as a framework to support reflection on how quality practices impact children's holistic development. Through critical evaluation, this paper will argue that, while quality assurance tools provide valuable structure and

guidance, their effectiveness depends on how meaningfully they are explained and used on a day-to-day basis.

The Importance of Going Beyond Statutory Requirements

Statutory frameworks, such as those regulated by CIW, are essential in ensuring that early year's settings meet fundamental requirements in areas such as safeguarding, staff ratios, and health and safety. This is supported by GOV.UK (2014). These frameworks protect children and provide reassurance to families. However, they do not necessarily guarantee good experiences or optimal developmental outcomes. Reflecting on practice, it becomes clear that meeting the minimum standards alone may result in care that is compliant but not necessarily outstanding. Going beyond statutory requirements enables practitioners to adopt a more holistic and child-centred approach. For example, rather than simply ensuring that children are supervised, high-quality settings focus on creating environments that promote curiosity, independence, and emotional security. This is crucial for their social development as stated by Birthto5matters (N.D). While statutory requirements largely address children's physiological and safety needs, additional quality measures are often needed to support higher-level needs such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation. For instance, as stated by Guillen (2018), warm and responsive relationships with practitioners can foster a sense of belonging, while opportunities for choice and achievement can enhance self-esteem.

There are several benefits associated with exceeding statutory requirements, as supported by Tamasy (2018). Firstly, children are more likely to achieve better outcomes across all areas of development, including communication, social skills, and emotional wellbeing. Secondly, practitioners gain from engaging in reflective practice, as it can improve their professional knowledge, confidence, and overall job satisfaction. Thirdly, parents are more inclined to trust and engage with settings that clearly demonstrate a commitment to quality, which helps to strengthen partnerships and communication. However, it is important to maintain a critical perspective. Introducing additional quality assurance measures can increase workload and place added pressure on staff, particularly in settings with limited

resources. There is also a risk that practitioners may become too focused on meeting the requirements of specific frameworks. Therefore, while the benefits of exceeding statutory requirements are considerable, it is crucial that such approaches are implemented carefully and in a sustainable way.

Quality for All Mark: A Holistic Approach to Continuous Improvement

The Quality for All Mark is a recognised accreditation scheme that supports early years settings in reviewing and improving their practice, as supported by Dewis Wales (2026). It adopts a holistic approach, considering areas such as leadership, planning, safeguarding, inclusion, and partnerships with families. The framework encourages settings to take part in ongoing self-evaluation and to make gradual improvements over time. One of its main strengths is the strong focus on reflective practice. Practitioners are encouraged to critically review their provision, recognise areas that need development, and take appropriate action to improve outcomes for children. This reflects wider guidance within the sector, where reflective practice is seen as central to maintaining quality, as stated by NSPCC (2026). This helps to create a culture of continuous improvement, which is vital for maintaining high-quality provision. In addition, achieving this accreditation can enhance a setting's reputation, reassure parents and show a clear commitment to going beyond statutory expectations.

When linked to Abraham Maslow's theory, as given by McLeod (2026), the Quality for All Mark can be seen to support a broad range of children's needs. For instance, effective safeguarding procedures help meet children's physiological and safety needs, while inclusive practice and positive relationships encourage a sense of belonging. Opportunities for child-led learning and celebrating achievements can also support the development of self-esteem and, ultimately, self-actualisation. These ideas align with GOV.UK (2014)'s Early Years Foundation Stage framework, which shows the importance of meeting children's individual needs and promoting holistic development. However, there are some limitations to consider. Achieving and maintaining the Quality for All Mark can be both time-consuming and demanding in terms of resources, particularly for smaller settings. Practitioners may face increased workload due to the need for evidence collection and documentation. There is also a risk that too much focus on meeting accreditation requirements could reduce the

time spent engaging directly with children. This reflects concerns raised in wider early years guidance about balancing paperwork with meaningful interaction, as supported by Foundation Years (N.D). This highlights the importance of using the framework as a genuine tool for improvement rather than simply a way to gain recognition. From a reflective viewpoint, its success largely depends on how meaningfully practitioners engage with the process. If used effectively, it can lead to significant improvements. If not, its impact may be limited.

Environment Rating Scales: Evaluating the Learning Environment

The Environment Rating Scales are widely used tools designed to assess the quality of early years environments. They consider a range of factors, including space, resources, daily routines, and interactions, using a structured scoring system. This provides clear guidance on strengths as well as areas that require development. A key advantage of these scales is their clarity and level of objectivity. The scoring system helps practitioners pinpoint specific areas for improvement and track progress over time. This can be especially helpful when preparing for inspections or demonstrating quality to external stakeholders such as Ofsted (2026). Furthermore, the scales place strong emphasis on the child's experience, ensuring that environments are safe, engaging, and inclusive.

In relation to McLeod (2026)'s explanation of Maslow's hierarchy, these tools are particularly effective in supporting children's safety needs. Well-organised spaces, suitable resources, and consistent routines all contribute to a sense of stability and security, which are essential for further development. Guidance from organisations such as the National Day Nurseries Association, NDNA (2024), also demonstrates the importance of safe and stimulating environments in supporting children's learning. Despite this, there are limitations. One common criticism is that the approach can be overly standardised, meaning it may not fully reflect the unique context of individual settings or the diverse needs of children. Cultural differences and personal preferences, for example, may not always be captured within the criteria. In addition, although interactions are considered, the focus on the physical environment means that the quality of relationships and teaching may not be fully explored. Another issue is the potential for practitioners to prioritise achieving higher scores rather than genuinely improving children's experiences. This can lead to a tick box

approach, where measurable outcomes take precedence over meaningful practice. From a reflective perspective, while these tools are useful for identifying strengths and areas for development, they should not be used in isolation. Instead, they should be combined with other approaches that focus more directly on interactions and emotional wellbeing.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale: Enhancing Interactions

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale is an assessment tool that focuses on the quality of interactions between practitioners and children. It highlights the importance of sustained shared thinking, where adults and children engage in meaningful conversations, problem solving, and collaborative learning. This concept is strongly supported by research from Tower Hamlets (N.D) which emphasises the importance of high-quality interactions in early learning (A major strength of this approach is its focus on teaching and learning experiences. Unlike tools that concentrate mainly on the environment, it explores how practitioners support children's cognitive and emotional development through their interactions. This makes it particularly valuable for promoting outcomes such as language development, critical thinking, and emotional resilience. When viewed through Maslow's theory, as given by McLeod (2026), this approach supports the upper levels of the hierarchy. Positive relationships help children develop a sense of belonging, while opportunities to express ideas and be heard contribute to self-esteem. Sustained shared thinking also allows children to explore their interests and reach their full potential, supporting self-actualisation. From a reflective standpoint, this approach encourages practitioners to become more aware of how they interact with children and to adopt more intentional strategies. This can lead to deeper learning experiences and stronger relationships. However, there are challenges. The approach requires a high level of skill to use effectively, and practitioners may need additional training. Assessments can also be subjective, as they rely on observation and professional judgement, which may lead to inconsistencies. In busy settings, carrying out detailed observations can also be time-consuming. Despite these challenges, this approach offers valuable insight into areas of practice that are not easily measured by other tools. When used alongside environmental assessment methods, it contributes to a more balanced understanding of quality.

Comparative Reflection on Quality Assurance Methods

After comparing these approaches, it reveals how complex and multi layered quality is within early years settings. Each method focuses on a different aspect. The Quality for All Mark takes a whole setting approach, environment rating tools evaluate the physical environment, and interaction-based approaches focus on emotional wellbeing and learning experiences. From a reflective outlook, it becomes clear that no single approach is sufficient on its own. Instead, a combination of methods is needed to meet the varied and complex needs of children. This supports the idea, reflected in government guidance, that quality is an ongoing process of evaluation and improvement, as stated by GOV.UK (2020). Using Maslow's hierarchy as a framework, it can be suggested that each tool supports different levels of need. Environmental tools focus mainly on basic and safety needs, interaction-based approaches support belonging and esteem, while broader frameworks bring these elements together into a more holistic model. However, using multiple methods can also present challenges, such as increased workload, duplication, and the risk of overwhelming practitioners. For this reason, settings need to carefully choose and implement tools in a way that is manageable and clearly focused on improving outcomes for children.

Conclusion

In conclusion, promoting quality beyond statutory requirements is essential for delivering high quality early years provision. While frameworks from Care Inspectorate Wales (2021) provide a necessary baseline, they do not fully reflect the complexity of quality in practice. Additional approaches such as the Quality for All Mark, environmental rating tools, and interaction focused methods offer valuable opportunities for reflection, evaluation, and ongoing improvement. Each approach has its own strengths and limitations. Holistic frameworks support overall development, environmental tools provide structured assessment, and interaction-based approaches focus on relationships and learning. When used together, they offer a more complete understanding of quality. Applying Maslow's theory further demonstrates the importance of addressing children's needs, from basic care through to self-actualisation. Ultimately, the impact of quality assurance methods depends

on how they are used in practice. Rather than being treated as checklists, they should support reflective, child centred approaches that prioritise each child's wellbeing and development. True quality is achieved not simply through meeting requirements, but through a genuine commitment to continuous improvement and meaningful learning experiences that allow every child to thrive.

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