

AI Statement

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. 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.

Reflective paper

Quality in the early years often indicates how well a setting supports children's learning, wellbeing and development. This also includes the ways in which practitioners create a nurturing and supportive environment that meets children's needs (Rademacher et al., 2025). Structurally, quality in the early years can be provided through employing staff with extensive early years knowledge and qualifications, ensuring the correct staff ratios and a high quality learning environment. However, it is positive adult attachments and relationships with the children that often reflect high quality in the early years (OECD,2024). ESTYN (2023) supports this as they suggest high quality settings within Wales focus on positive interactions, relationships, and a child centred approach. Quality is achieved in the early years through highly qualified practitioners providing engaging environments and creating positive attachments. Providing this high-quality care is important in the early as studies show it can have a positive impact on children's language development, independence and social skills (Harvard Gazette, 2018). Additionally, quality in the early years helps to ensure inclusivity and equality as it supports children who may come from a disadvantaged background to have equal opportunities (Education Development Trust, 2024). Furthermore, studies suggest that quality care in the early years is important as it does not only depend on the practitioners in the setting but also requires effective leadership, continuous training and development and a collaborative approach (Hansen and Ringsmose, 2023).

It is essential that children have access to quality care and education in the early years as it effects children's holistic developments and can affect their outcomes in the future. Research shows that the early years are a critical time for brain development in children and that this can be impacted by the quality of adult and peer interactions and their environment (Phillips and Boyd, 2023). Eliassen, Brandlistuen and Wang (2024) support this research as they suggest that knowledgeable practitioners and engaging learning environments support the development of children's social and cognitive skills which supports lifelong academic success. Furthermore, it is important that children have access to quality early years education to ensure disadvantaged children have equal opportunities and to limit inequalities (European Commission, 2024). However, in contrast to this,

if children do not have access to quality education it can have a negative effect on children's development and create more inequalities (Grenier, 2023).

It is important as early years practitioners to promote quality above statutory requirements as often basic statutory requirements are set out to ensure children's safety. However, quality provision in the early years supports overall wellbeing and ensures children can develop holistically (Education Development Trust, 2024). Additionally, statutory requirements give settings guidance but do not provide the children with engaging, rich learning experiences and opportunities (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013) Furthermore, the Harvard Gazette (2018) suggests that the quality of the setting and interactions with practitioners are important as it has a significant impact on children's wellbeing and overall development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory supports this research as it emphasises the influence of a positive, supportive environment on children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The National Day Nurseries Association

Using additional methods of Quality assurance schemes such as the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) can have many benefits to improve and develop quality within the early years as the NDNA goes above meeting minimum standards and strives to promote a child centred approach, ongoing improvement, effective leadership and high-quality environments (NDNA, 2023). Their quality first style emphasises the importance of children, practitioners and families working in collaboration and follows a reflective approach (NDNA,2023). Furthermore, the NDNA has many advantages to improve quality in the early years such as the focus on the ability for a setting to improve and reflect which is emphasised in their quality counts programme which promotes self-reflection, professional development and working in collaboration. This is important as it ensures the best possible outcomes (NDNA, 2024a). In addition to this, NDNA provides professional development, effective resources and provides encouragement and support to early years practitioners. This is a key factor in to promote and provide quality care as it ensures practitioners have the correct skills and knowledge to provide children with high quality education that meets their needs (NDNA,2023). Research from the Harvard Gazette (2018) supports this as they emphasise the importance and impact that good early year's practitioners have on children's learning, wellbeing and

development. Another advantage of the NDNA when improving quality is that the NDNA are able to advocate for early years settings and can impact policy which plays an important role in raising standards and accessing funding (NDNA, 2024b)

This method informs and supports settings throughout the UK and further promotes quality by gathering information about the early years sector through surveys and research which provides information regarding funding, obstacles and concerns about quality. They also provide information about policies and frameworks and how to embed them into practice (NDNA, 2024). However, the NDNA has limitations as there is information it does not give settings. For example, research often highlights funding and staffing but does not provide information regarding children's individual experiences. This is important as a setting may have the same ratio of staff, however the quality of staff and relationships with children may differ between settings which can impact children's wellbeing and development (Slot et al., 2020). Additionally, NDNA data can also have limitations as it can be broad and not specific to the local area of the setting or Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). Furthermore, the impact of the NDNA is based heavily on the effectiveness of leadership, staff and the resources they have access to which means that the children's development and outcomes will differ in each setting (Hansen and Ringsmose, 2023).

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being

An environmental rating scale is also a tool to assess and measure quality in early years provision and adult interaction. SSTEWS is an environmental rating scale which focuses on how the children are taught and the importance of the practitioner's role in supporting children's learning and development. This is demonstrated by the practitioner engaging in the child's interests and listening to the child to create high quality interactions and build positive relationships which will develop children's thinking skills (Hoare, n.d).

Practitioners use the information and evidence gathered by SSTEWS to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the setting and areas that need developing (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). In addition to this, evidence and data gathered from SSTEWS can be used by practitioners to highlight specific areas of professional

development needed. This is important to drive quality as continuous improvement in a setting is essential to improve and maintain high quality (Miller, 2019). Moreover, both SSTEWW and Estyn prioritise children's wellbeing and the importance of positive relationships (Estyn, 2024). Furthermore, SSTEWW supports Estyn inspection priorities such as positive adult interactions and learner participation. This information can support practitioners to drive quality in their setting as they will be aware of what is expected of the setting (Estyn, 2023).

SSTEWW has many advantages that are driving quality in the early years as studies show that the promotion of sustained shared thinking and wellbeing has a positive impact on children's language, social and cognitive development and links to positive outcomes in further learning (Howard *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, SSTEWW encourages reflective practice as they are frequently observing interactions between practitioners and children. This is important and promotes quality as it ensures continuous improvement of the setting and gives staff a chance to self-reflect and see what areas they may need additional professional development (Siraj, Kingston & Melhuish, 2024). Vygotsky (1978) supports this as he suggests that practitioners that can reflect on how they encourage sustained shared thinking can enhance play-based learning. Furthermore, another advantage of the SSTEWW scale is the focus on emotional wellbeing as it can often be overlooked with other tools. This is important to drive quality as building positive, trusting relationships and the ability to regulate emotions play a key role in children's overall development (Tower Hamlets, 2025). Slot *et al* (2020) also emphasises the importance of children's wellbeing to drive quality within a setting as he suggests when children's wellbeing is paramount, they are more likely to engage in shared thinking and collaborative learning. Similarly, Welsh Government (2022) emphasise that supporting children's wellbeing can improve quality in the early years as it ensures equal opportunities for all learners, ensuring an inclusive and supporting learning environment.

However, there are limitations of the SSTEWW scale as there are concerns regarding the reliability. This is due to it being an observational tool that relies heavily on the ability and consistency of the observer. Differences in training or opinion can impact quality as the results would differ between various settings (Howard *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, following SSTEWW can be time consuming as practitioners will need to make time for training, observations and self-reflection. This could impact quality as

many settings with time restraints or struggling with staff will find it challenging to implement SSTEWS (Siraj, Kingston & Melhuish, 2024). Furthermore, research suggests that whilst SSTEWS emphasises the importance of interaction and wellbeing it does not observe areas such as children's physical development or environment. To maximise the effectiveness of SSTEWS it can be used with other frameworks such as the Early Childhood Environments Rating Scale (Department for Education, 2021).

The National Day Nurseries Association and Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being both strive to drive quality and continuous improvement in the early years. However, their approach to doing so is different. SSTEWS is an observational tool which focuses on the interactions between practitioners and children and emphasises the importance of sustained shared thinking and promoting wellbeing to ensure quality care (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2024). However, to contrast this, the National Day Nurseries Association is an organisation that focuses on improvement and staff training to drive quality and supports settings to promote quality leadership and management (NDNA, 2023). The two have similarities as they both focus on the importance of reflection in practice, professional development and purposeful interaction to drive quality and ensure children's holistic development. However, in contrast, SSTEWS is more methodical, based on data and evidence whilst NDNA follows a more adaptable, universal approach to ensuring quality. Furthermore, a key difference between SSTEWS and NDNA is that SSTEWS focuses closely on wellbeing which can be seen as a limitation as to get accurate data of a whole setting it would need to be used alongside other tools (Howard *et al.*, 2020). However, NDNA looks at a wide range of factors as well as wellbeing in a setting such as strong leadership and staff, but the outcome of quality then depends on the productivity and engagement of leadership and staff (NDNA, 2024b). To conclude, both tools strive to ensure quality in different ways and practitioners can use the tool which is more beneficial to their setting. SSTEWS can be an effective tool to provide data regarding quality interaction within the setting whilst the NDNA supports a wider range of provision in the early years.

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