

ECEY6011:

Leadership and Management for systems of quality.

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1. Reflective Paper:

Understanding what quality means and why it matters

Quality in early years settings is not a single or fixed concept. It is complex and often debated. People usually describe quality as either structural or process quality. Structural quality includes measurable factors like staff qualifications, staff-to-child ratios, leadership, and the physical environment. Process quality focuses on what children actually experience, especially how adults and children interact, the emotional support provided, communication, and the responsiveness of staff each day (Slot, 2018; OECD, 2021). This distinction is important because having good structures can support quality, but it does not always mean children will experience high-quality teaching, care, or relationships in practice (Slot, 2018). Structural quality sets the stage for practice, but process quality shapes the impact on children's experiences and outcomes.

Policy and research show that quality in early years settings is very important, especially for long-term outcomes. The OECD points out that strong, ongoing interactions are key for children's language, thinking, self-control, and emotional health. This means quality is not just about having the right resources, but about how well they are used in daily practice (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2021). The best settings focus on being intentional, responsive, and emotionally supportive, not just meeting structural standards (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2021). Quality is dynamic and shaped by interactions, not fixed solely by

policy. This shows that improving quality needs ongoing attention to teaching, not just following regulations.

In Wales, the Flying Start programme views high-quality childcare as a key way to help children develop and reduce disadvantage. This means quality is used to address inequality, not just to meet regulations. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 also says that early support and prevention are important for better long-term outcomes for children and communities (Welsh Government, 2026; Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015). These frameworks show that quality in early years settings has wider social and economic importance, reaching beyond individual settings to broader systems of support, especially for tackling disadvantage early and effectively.

Statutory inspections also demonstrate the importance of quality. Care Inspectorate Wales says inspections check how well services are led, how children's needs are met, and how quality is monitored and improved over time. The joint guidance from Estyn and CIW for non-school settings covers care, education, safeguarding, leadership, and self-evaluation within a single framework (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2024; Estyn, 2026). This approach sees quality as both a legal and teaching issue. Settings need to do more than meet minimum standards; they must show ongoing improvement and positive outcomes for children. Quality must be maintained and proven over time, not just achieved once. This shows a shift in inspections toward assessing impact, consistency, and progress, not just isolated examples.

However, as discussed in Part 1, having quality assurance systems does not always guarantee real quality. One main problem is that these systems can focus too much on compliance, leading to more paperwork and a focus on 'evidence' rather than making real improvements. Roberts-Holmes notes that data and accountability can shape teaching to value measurable results over children's real experiences, and this is still a key issue in early years settings (Roberts-Holmes, 2015). This creates tension between showing quality and actually delivering it in meaningful ways, especially when practitioners feel pressure to provide evidence instead of reflecting on their practice.

This reflection looks at two more quality assurance methods beyond legal requirements: the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale (SSTEWS) and feedback from parents and stakeholders. It considers what each method reveals, what each might overlook, and how each could help or limit real quality improvement.

SSTEWS as a research-based quality assurance tool

The SSTEWS Scale was designed to assess aspects of process quality that broader environmental tools often miss, such as sustained shared thinking, emotional well-being, language-rich interaction, and sensitive teaching (Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish, 2015). SSTEWS stands out because it focuses on relationships and interactions, not just physical resources or how settings are arranged. This approach aligns with OECD

findings that the quality of interactions is one of the best indicators of what children experience in early education and care (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2021).

One main benefit of SSTEWE is that it gives settings clearer ways to talk about quality. Terms like ‘warm relationships’, ‘responsive practice’, or ‘high-quality interaction’ can be unclear unless they are linked to what can actually be seen in practice. SSTEWE helps practitioners and leaders check if adults encourage children to think more deeply, support emotional security, and create interactions that are both challenging and supportive (Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish, 2015). This strengthens quality assurance by moving beyond general impressions and focusing on detailed analysis, which is especially important when observation might otherwise become routine or just about compliance.

SSTEWE also fits with current priorities in Wales. The Flying Start childcare guidance (Welsh Government, 2026) stresses the need for high-quality care for children facing disadvantage, with a focus on interaction, communication, and emotional well-being. When the aim is to reduce inequalities through early intervention, a tool that closely examines adult–child interaction is especially helpful, since communication, emotional security, and sustained thinking are important for school readiness and overall development (OECD, 2021; Welsh Government, 2026).

Another strength of SSTEWE is its use in reflective supervision. Social Care Wales says that good supervision should encourage reflection, feedback, professional growth, and improvement, rather than simply act as a compliance check (Social Care Wales, 2025). Using SSTEWE in supervision provides a shared framework for discussion. Rather than just looking at procedures, supervision can explore why certain interactions worked, how children responded, and what could be better. This encourages a more thoughtful and analytical approach to practice, connecting quality assurance directly to professional learning and ongoing improvement in the setting.

However, SSTEWE has its limits. Even though it offers a structured framework, it still depends on observation and judgement. Slot (2018) points out that measuring process quality is complicated because it relies on context, timing, and the observer’s perspective. This means SSTEWE cannot completely remove subjectivity. Two practitioners might see the same interaction differently, especially when it comes to subtle things like emotional attunement or cognitive challenge.

Also, interactions can change depending on the staff, routines, and time of day. One strong observation might hide an inconsistency, while a weaker one might not show what usually happens. This shows the risk of relying too heavily on single pieces of evidence and supports CIW’s focus on ongoing review rather than one-off assessments (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2024).

There is also a risk of performative practice. Roberts-Holmes (2015) explains that accountability systems can lead practitioners to show expected behaviours instead of acting naturally. If SSTEWE is used in a high-stakes way, staff might change their practice

to fit the tool rather than focus on children's needs. This creates a tension because the tool is meant to capture real interactions but might end up shaping them.

Broader research also questions standardised tools. Alpys and Hernández-Torrano (2025) raise concerns about how well rating scales capture the complexity of quality across different settings, including limitations related to psychological well-being and cultural differences. While SSTEW fills some earlier gaps, it still reflects certain ideas about what quality means, so it should be used as part of a wider approach, not on its own.

Parental and stakeholder feedback as quality assurance

Parental and stakeholder feedback offers a unique kind of quality evidence, drawing on real-life experiences instead of just observations. It can be collected through questionnaires, informal talks, consultation events, or regular communication. This method shows that quality is built through relationships and develops over time, not only during observed moments (Department for Education, 2021; UNICEF, 2019).

A key advantage of this method is that it captures long-term perspectives. Parents see changes in their children over time, such as growth in confidence, language skills, relationships, and attitudes toward learning. They may also notice aspects that inspections miss, such as communication, transitions, and how well the setting supports families (Department for Education, 2021; Care Inspectorate Wales, 2024).

Stakeholder feedback also helps support a rights-based approach. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the importance of considering children's views in decisions that affect them (UNICEF, 2019). Even though young children may not give formal feedback, involving families helps make sure children's experiences are included, leading to more inclusive and participatory approaches to quality.

This is especially important in Flying Start settings, where working closely with families is key. The Welsh Government (2026) highlights the need to work with families to improve outcomes, so quality should be seen both within the setting and in terms of family experience and accessibility.

However, there are some limitations. Murphy (2023) points out problems such as response bias, low response rates, and differences in how people interpret questions. Feedback might reflect satisfaction rather than real teaching quality, so positive relationships do not always indicate strong teaching.

Participation is not always equal. Families who face barriers like language, time, or trust may be less likely to respond, so feedback might not reflect everyone's views. This matters most in programs that aim to reduce inequality, where the voices of underrepresented families are especially important (Welsh Government, 2026).

Also, feedback can lose its value if it is collected but not used meaningfully. Care Inspectorate Wales says it is important to involve people in evaluating and improving services, but just taking part is not enough if it does not lead to real changes (Care

Inspectorate Wales, 2024). Without analysis and action, feedback can become just a formality, as Roberts-Holmes (2015) criticises in accountability systems.

Comparing the two methods

SSTEW and stakeholder feedback each offer different insights. SSTEW gives structured, detailed information about teaching and interaction. Stakeholder feedback, on the other hand, sheds light on relationships, communication, and overall experience.

SSTEW helps identify strengths and areas for growth in teaching, making it useful for targeted professional development. Parental feedback is better for understanding how families experience the service, such as trust, communication, and inclusivity. However, it cannot judge the quality of teaching or interaction on its own. This shows that each method addresses different aspects of quality instead of competing to provide the same evidence.

Both methods have their limits. SSTEW might miss long-term experiences, family views, or the organisation's culture. Stakeholder feedback may not show the full complexity of interactions and learning. This is why using both methods together is important. Combining them helps create a more balanced view of quality, covering both what happens in practice and how others experience it.

The Estyn and CIW framework shows this approach by using different types of evidence from care, education, and leadership (Estyn, 2026). But triangulation is more than just gathering data. It means comparing evidence, spotting patterns, and building a deeper understanding of quality. Without this, collecting more data may not improve practice and could just add to the workload without making a difference.

How these methods help improve quality

How these methods are used makes a big difference. SSTEW can support professional development by identifying where interaction and teaching can be improved. Social Care Wales (2025) says supervision should encourage reflection and growth, so tools like SSTEW should guide conversations rather than just produce scores. This helps practitioners think more deeply about their work and see how their interactions affect children's learning and development.

Parental feedback can also help by showing where communication, inclusion, or partnership could be better. The Department for Education (2021) stresses the importance of working with families, so feedback should lead to changes in practice when needed. Used well, this builds stronger relationships and makes things more consistent between home and the setting, which supports children's development.

But both methods can lose their value if they are used solely to meet requirements rather than to encourage reflection. Care Inspectorate Wales and the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016 focus on making real improvements, not just paperwork (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2024). If evidence is gathered only for inspections,

it does little to change practice. This shows why quality assurance should be a regular part of work, not just something done for inspections.

Leadership is important in making these methods useful. Leaders decide if quality assurance encourages reflection and improvement or just becomes a checklist. Good systems focus on open discussion, ongoing learning, and long-term growth, matching Welsh inspection and supervision frameworks (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2024; Estyn, 2026; Social Care Wales, 2025). This shows that quality depends not just on the tools used, but on how they are put into practice in each setting.

Conclusion

Adding more quality assurance methods can improve outcomes, but only if they are used carefully. SSTEW offers a close look at teaching, while stakeholder feedback brings real experiences and partnerships. Neither approach is enough by itself. Quality improves when different types of evidence are combined, used with care, and linked to real professional growth rather than just meeting requirements.

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