

Leadership and Management for systems of quality.

(ECEY5011)

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AI statement:

I confirm that I have used <https://copilot.microsoft.com> for research and proof-reading purposes only. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I used before and after the use of any AI tool which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Introduction.

The purpose of this essay is to critically examine what is meant by *quality* in early years and to explore why achieving and assuring quality remains a central priority within early years provision. It will analyse the benefits associated with high-quality childcare, drawing on key debates and contrasting perspectives. The essay will unpack the complexity of the concept of quality before comparing two influential evaluation tools - the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEW) Scale and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). Through this comparison, the discussion will highlight how each framework interprets and measures quality and how these differences influence practice, professional judgement and the overall learning environment for young children.

Quality in the Early Years

Quality is embedded throughout the key procedures, policies, and legislation that shape early childhood education. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)* emphasise children's rights to high-quality care, education, and participation in particular Article 3 – which states that all decisions and actions affecting a child should prioritise their best interests. Article 28 - every child has a right to education, Article 29 - that education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full and Article 31 – every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities (UNICEF, 2024). In Wales, statutory guidance and framework including the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (Welsh Government, 2024) and the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare (Welsh Government, 2023) set out clear expectations for high-quality provision and consistent practice.

These can be broken down into structural, process, and system-level factors, that together support children's learning, development and wellbeing (Eadie *et al.*, 2024; Slot, 2018; Mosher, 2024). Structural quality refers to regulated features such as staff qualifications, ratios, group size and the physical environment. Process quality is considered the core of quality, focusing on children's lived experiences – this can relate to warm, responsive interactions, purposeful play, language-rich communication and inclusive relationships. Recent research shows that high process

quality is strongly associated with improved cognitive, social and emotional outcomes (Eadie *et al.*, 2024; von Suchodoletz *et al.*, 2023). And lastly, System-level quality, which refers to the wider structures that ensure consistency and equity, including inspection, funding and workforce development. Eadie *et al.*, (2024) states that all three dimensions are key for children's holistic development.

Many of the frameworks that guide practitioners and shape the day-to-day running of early years settings emphasise the importance of high-quality care. The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings highlights that high-quality early education underpins children's development and supports the skills needed for lifelong learning (Welsh Government, 2024). It stresses that progress across the five developmental pathways depends on the quality of interactions, experiences and the environments practitioners provide. It also suggests that good-quality settings can reduce the impact of adversity on children by supporting the development of necessary skills to build resilience through consistent, positive relationships in emotionally safe environments (Welsh Government, 2024). The Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care framework reflects the same principles adding that high quality provisions are ones that support babies and young children to thrive during the early critical period of development (Welsh Government, 2024).

This high-quality rights-based approach draws on national and international research such as The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE), which later became the Effective Provision of Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education Study (EPPSE) and the follow-up Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) (University of Oxford, 2023). These studies demonstrate that high-quality early childhood education and a supportive home learning environment have long-term positive effects on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, and have significantly shaped UK early years policy and provision (University of Oxford, 2023). Their findings have informed major government initiatives, including free childcare initiatives such as Flying Start Programme, which draws upon longitudinal evidence to support its principle that high-quality childcare and early years provision yield particularly strong benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (University of Oxford, 2023; Welsh Government, 2026).

Providing high-quality care and education, such as that outlined in Flying Start guidance and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings aligns strongly with the work of both Bowlby and Vygotsky, who emphasise emotionally secure, relationship-rich, and interaction-focused learning environments. Bowlby's Attachment Theory highlights the importance of consistent, sensitive caregiving in supporting children's emotional well-being and their confidence to explore their surroundings (Bowlby, 1969). This is reflected in the key-worker approach, nurturing relationships, and creating a sense of belonging that provides children with a secure base for learning which can be found in Flying Start guidance, the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings and the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2026; Welsh Government, 2023). Complementing this, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory views learning as a process that develops through social interactions in which skilled adults scaffold children's development within the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Although many early years frameworks emphasise "high-quality" provision, they do not always explain what *quality* actually means or what it looks like in an early years setting (Palaiologou, 2023; Bonnetti, 2018). Moss (2016), Dahlberg *et al.* (2013) and Palaiologou (2023) argue that "quality" is not a fixed, objective or universal concept. Moss (2016) states that quality is rooted in regulatory modernity, used to control practice through universal standards, checklists and accountability systems (Moss, 2016). In addition, Dahlberg *et al.* (2013) claim that the language of quality cannot accommodate diversity, subjectivity, context or multiple perspectives and Palaiologou (2023) argues that attempts to create universal standards ignore the complex social ecologies of early childhood settings and reinforce oversimplified structural/process measures. Moss (2016) proposes an alternative based on meaning-making, a democratic and interpretive process that values multiple perspectives and pedagogical documentation as tools for reflective practice. In agreement Dahlberg *et al.* (2013) suggests going beyond the concept of quality (Jones *et al.*, 2016).

Environmental rating scale - SSTEWS

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) Scale is a widely used observational rating tool designed to assess and strengthen process

quality in early childhood education, with a particular focus on the interactions and relational pedagogy that underpin children's learning and wellbeing. Developed by Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, the scale builds on extensive international research, including the EPPE and REPEY studies, which demonstrated the central role of sustained shared thinking in supporting children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Unlike earlier environment-focused rating scales, SSTEWE offers a more nuanced lens on practice by examining how adults create emotionally secure environments, extend children's thinking, and promote self-regulation, language and problem-solving (Siraj *et al.*, 2024). The scale is organised into four subscales - emotional wellbeing and self-regulation, language and communication, learning and critical thinking, and planning and assessment. Each subscale contains graded indicators that describe increasing levels of pedagogical quality. SSTEWE is both a research-validated measure and a practical professional development tool, supporting educators to reflect on and improve the quality of their interactions and the learning experiences they provide internationally (Siraj *et al.*, 2024; University of Oxford, 2023).

Using the SSTEWE offers several important benefits for early years practice, particularly through its focus on high-quality interactions that promote children's thinking, communication, and emotional security (Waters and McDonald, 2022). Research undertaken in 16 Flying Start setting showed improvements across all areas of the scale 6-12 months after implementing targeted professional learning, this suggests the approach supported meaningful changes in pedagogy. However, some issues performance and practitioner confidence came to light (Waters and McDonald, 2022). This demonstrates that SSTEWE strengthens the quality of adult-child interactions and supports children's social-emotional development, language, and critical thinking (Siraj & Kingston, 2015; Robb, 2023).

By providing a structured, research-informed framework, SSTEWE helps practitioners reflect on how effectively they support children's problem-solving, language development, and emotional resilience, ultimately encouraging more intentional and responsive teaching (Featherbe, 2024). It also promotes consistency across staff teams and can highlight strengths and areas for professional development (Tower Hamlets Council, 2024; Waters and McDonald, 2022). However, despite these advantages, SSTEWE is not without limitations. The observation process can be

time-consuming and may feel overwhelming for settings with limited staffing or experience in reflective practice (Brodie, 2024; Waters and McDonald, 2022). Some practitioners may also find the criteria overly prescriptive, potentially narrowing their focus to what is measured rather than the broader context of children's play and learning. Additionally, because SSTEW relies heavily on observer interpretation, there is a risk of subjectivity influencing scores (Brodie, 2024). Overall, while SSTEW is a valuable tool for improving interaction quality, its effectiveness depends on adequate training, time, and a reflective culture within the setting.

Environmental rating scale - ECERS

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is one of the most influential and widely used tools for assessing quality in early childhood education. Originally developed in 1980, ECERS was designed to provide a comprehensive measure of quality across early years settings and its long-standing use has generated a substantial body of evidence linking ECERS scores to child outcomes, practice and programme characteristics. (Environment rating scale, n.d.; Early *et al.*, 2018) The revised ECERS-R was later development with greater attention to cultural diversity, inclusion and updated understandings of developmentally appropriate practice. The revision drew on multiple sources of evidence, including international research, large-scale studies using ECERS and practitioner feedback from diverse settings. Over time, ECERS has been translated into numerous languages and used all over the world, further validating its relevance across cultural contexts. As a result, ECERS functions not only as a robust research instrument but also as a practical framework that guides settings in identifying strengths, addressing areas for improvement and enhancing the overall quality of children's early learning environments (Environment rating scale, n.d.).

One major strength of ECERS according to Burchinal *et al.* (2016) is that it provides a standardised, research-validated framework that helps teachers and practitioners to access classroom environments in a consistent and systematic way. Recent studies show that ECERS scores are positively associated with aspects of instructional quality and children's developmental outcomes, particularly in language and social domains. The tool also encourages reflective practice by breaking quality

into observable indicators, supporting professional development and continuous improvement efforts (Hooper & Hallam, 2017).

However, despite its usefulness, ECERS has been critiqued for being time-intensive and sometimes misaligned with diverse pedagogical approaches. Researchers have also noted that ECERS may not fully capture the complexity of teacher - child interactions or the cultural responsiveness of the learning environment, both of which are recognised as essential components of quality (Slot, 2018). Additionally, ECERS can become more about scoring well rather than authentically supporting children's learning (Gordon *et al.*, 2015). Overall, while ECERS remains a valuable tool for assessing early childhood environments, it is most effective when used alongside other measures that capture relational, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions of quality (Early *et al.*, 2017).

A comparison of the two environmental rating scales - SSTEWS and ECERS.

The SSTEWS scale and the ECERS are both widely used tools for assessing quality in early childhood education, yet they differ substantially in their focus, depth and intended use. ECERS provides a broad evaluation of classroom quality by examining environmental features such as space, routines, materials, and general interactions, making it a comprehensive tool for inspections and structural quality assessments (Gordon *et al.*, 2015). In contrast, the SSTEWS scale offers a more targeted analysis of process quality, emphasising the depth of teacher - child interactions, emotional support and the use of sustained shared thinking to extend children's learning (Siraj *et al.*, 2015). While both tools recognise the importance of interactions, SSTEWS captures the pedagogical strategies that underpin high-quality teaching in far greater detail, particularly in relation to cognitive and engagement areas compare to the ECERS (Slot, 2018).

To conclude ECERS is therefore more effective for evaluating the overall environment and meeting regulatory or quality assurance requirements, whereas SSTEWS is better suited for professional development and improving instructional practice. Together, these tools offer complementary perspectives: ECERS highlights environmental strengths and weaknesses, while SSTEWS provides insight into the

relational and pedagogical processes that most directly influence children's learning and wellbeing.

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