

A key aspect of early years policy is quality, which is defined as the standard by which something is measured in relation to other things of similar nature (Oxford Dictionary, n.d). Furthermore, something's level of excellence might be referred to as its quality. However, Moss (2016) stated that quality is a socially constructed concept that is frequently used as a substitute for the term "good" in education furthermore he also stated that quality was a choice, not a necessity. In early years setting, Pacey (n.d) states that quality can signify a safe, hygienic environment, an abundance of high-quality toys, equipment, and resources, and a wealth of opportunities for play and learning, both indoors and outdoors. Quality can also include nutritious meals and pleasant, social mealtimes, as well as a well-planned day and a tidy, well-managed environment. According to Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, (2002) the researching effective pedagogy in early years setting (REPEY) study which shared similar views as Pacey, believes that quality involves adults who establish warm and responsive relationships with children. Additionally, a quality setting should have clear educational goals and planning. Staff members should hold recognized early years qualifications, and trained staff should be part of the team. Finally, the study suggests that parents should be supported in their involvement in children's learning.

Quality however is not often defined as the same for early years setting, as settings can see quality in different ways . In early years settings, quality is considered important as it lays a strong foundation for a child's development and learning, ensuring that they receive adequate support that promotes and supports their holistic development (Richter et al., 2017). Furthermore, quality early years settings have to provide a safe and secure environment that fosters children's confidence, independence, and self-esteem, and it fosters partnership with stakeholders (parents, staff, communities) to provide high quality settings (Seaman and Giles, 2021). However, quality settings can reduce the gap in development for children and ensure that all children transition to foundation stage and other levels of education through constant communication with stakeholders, enhancing children's learning and development, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Eadie et al., 2022; Local Government Association, 2023).

In early years setting, it is considered essential to focus on ways to enhance the quality of the services they provide to not only the children in their setting but also to other stakeholders, even if they already have high scores, however some settings only focus on the scores they receive and not what is important that contributes to high quality settings (Gambaro, Stewart and Waldfogel, 2015). Furthermore, improving the quality of service is a continuous process that involves self-reflection, identifying areas that need improvement, developing improvement plans, and assessing their effectiveness (Backhouse and Ogunlayi, 2020). Early years setting needs to go above and beyond when it comes to quality improvement to offer children and their families the highest level of quality. With high-quality settings children can achieve positive outcomes in settings and acquire social, emotional, and cognitive skills for later in life (Housman, 2017). Achieving this requires taking into account various factors that contribute to high-quality early years setting. Therefore, by considering these key factors and gathering information on the different aspects, early years staff can work towards improving the quality of their setting and ensuring that children receive the best possible start in life.

In early years setting, gaining key information on various factors that contribute to children's overall development is essential for ensuring high-quality early years setting (Pianta, Downer and Hamre, 2016). These factors include, the number of children present, staff qualifications and experience, the learning environment (indoors and outdoors), the effectiveness of teaching procedures, resources and equipment availability, the level of parental involvement, and feedback from children, parents, staff and other stakeholders (Ishimine and Tayler, 2014). When early years setting is assessing the quality of their setting it also requires staff to consider children and their families' socio-economic background, as well as any children with additional learning needs in the setting (Stahl, Schober, and Spiess, 2018). This information provides staff with detailed information into each child's unique needs, effectively enabling staff to support each child in their setting. Additionally, gaining information on these different aspects of the setting can help staff identify areas for improvement and implement effective policies and procedures to enhance the quality of their setting. For example, if

parents' provides feedback through feedback forms or any other method that was used suggests a lack of resources or broken resources (for example, a broken fence or no ramp available for a child in a wheelchair) staff can allocate more resources to support children's overall wellbeing.

Using a quality assessment system, like the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), is one popular approach for assessing early years setting, such as the curriculum, the environment, and the interactions between staff and children. In general, assessing the level of quality improvement in early childhood education requires a multifaceted approach that considers a variety of factors and perspectives. There will be two Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales that will be focused on for this assignment: the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being scale (SSTEW) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS).

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEW) offer a comprehensive and detailed approach to identify areas of strength (high scores) and weakness (low scores) within an early years setting, providing staff with key information on where needs improvement and where they are doing well in their setting allowing them to go above and beyond when it comes to providing quality service (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2021). The ECERS assessment tool measures the quality of the physical environment of an early childhood program, covering various aspects such as environment, personal care routines, language-reasoning activities, interaction, program structure, and parents and staff (Brunsek *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, by evaluating the different factors, educators can identify areas that they are doing well in and those that need improvement and make changes that will enhance the setting quality.

The SSTEW Scale, on the other hand, focuses on the interactions between staff and children, interactions between child and child, sustained shared thinking and supporting children's interest and ideas in promoting and supporting children's social and emotional development (Gealy *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, by using this scale, staff can evaluate and

measure the overall quality of interactions and support given to children in the setting during play or any other activity and identify ways to improve the quality of their setting.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale is an environment rating scale that can be used for research, self-evaluation and improvement, audit and regulation which build on the ECERS scale (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). The sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing scale is a widely used tool in the field of early years setting to measure the quality of adult-child (staff-child) interactions (Levickis *et al.*, 2024). This scale is designed to assess the level of engagement, responsiveness, and emotional support that staff provides to children during their interactions (Howard *et al.*, 2020). The scale typically consists of several items that are rated based on what is observed between the adult and the child during an interaction (for example, play). It is measured on a 1-7 scale with seven being the highest (excellent) that shares a similar rating scale as the ECERS. The sustained shared thinking component of this scale focuses on the quality of the adult's engagement with the child. It measures staff member level of encouragement in the setting to the child to be in awe and wonder by asking open-ended questions, providing feedback, and responding to the child's ideas and interests (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). For example, during play a child is interested in water and soil but the activity is on water only the staff member can support the child by asking what do you think would happen if I add some water to the soil instead of saying we can add water to the soil another time.

Additionally, this scale also looks at the quality of the adult's interactions with the child in terms of the level of challenge and support provided to the child in the setting during an activity (Neale and Pino-Pasternak, 2017). For example, if a child in the setting has been interested in water for two days is the staff member going to allow that child to continue playing with water or are they going to add another item and prompt that question to allow the child to challenge themselves. Additionally, the emotional wellbeing part of this scale looks at the quality of emotional support provided by the staff to the child. It measures if the adult is responsive to the child's emotional needs, provides comfort and reassurance, and fosters a sense of security and trust in the

relationship (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2013). For example, the staff member can support a child in this area by simply telling the child thank you after completing a task. Furthermore, this scale is considered a key aspect in promoting emotional development in children and supporting their overall well-being (MacDonald, Gealy and Tinney, 2019). However, this scale has limitations in terms of what information it can provide to staff about the overall quality of the setting. For example, while the SSTEW scale can provide information into individual interactions, it does not reflect the overall environment of the setting or the experiences that children are having on a daily basis.

Additionally, the SSTEW scale does not take into account the impact of other factors, such as the qualifications and training of staff, which can also have a significant impact on the quality of care provided in early years settings. However, the sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing scale is an important tool for promoting positive outcomes for children in early years settings. It has been shown to be effective in improving children's social skills, language development, and emotional development. Additionally, not only does it support the child in the setting it also supports the emotional wellbeing of the adult in the setting, as it fosters a sense of belonging in the setting. However it is advised that before practitioners use the SSTEW scale that they attend a training session.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is another key assessment tool designed to assess early years setting. The ECERS was initially developed by Thelma Harms, Richard Clifford, and Debby Cryer in the 1980s, and has since been through several revisions and updates to reflect current best practices in early years setting (Scanlon *et al.*, 2023). The ECERS third edition assesses various aspects of the early years setting, including space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and literacy, learning activities, interaction and program structure (Early *et al.*, 2018). It assesses each of these components on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 indicating the highest quality. The ECERS-3 emphasizes the importance of creating a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment for young children that fosters their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Fujisawa, Fukai and Nakamuro, 2023). Moreover, the

ECERS - 3 has become a widely used tool for early years settings as it provides a comprehensive framework that allows staff to improve the quality of their setting (Naesby, 2020). Additionally, the ECERS- 3 tells staff about the overall quality of the physical environment, staff- child interactions and the program structure. This gives staff information about the quality of the setting in different departments which links to the main factors mentioned earlier, the effectiveness of teaching methods, resources and equipment availability, number of children present and the learning environment (Kelley *et al.*, 2020). However, the ECERS-3 eliminated the parents and staff subscale which would cause limited information to be provided on the quality of parent involvement in the setting and trained staff are needed to assess early years setting using this scale (Hestenes *et al.*, 2019; Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2015). Additionally, it is important to note that ECERS-3 is a tool for assessing the setting take a three hour interval and may not fully capture the ongoing process of the setting. Therefore, by using the ECERS - 3 to evaluate their settings staff can ensure that they are providing high-quality service and education that meets the needs of children and families.

When it comes to quality it is important to note that quality is an ongoing process and early years setting should go above and beyond when it is related to quality whether it is training and qualifications of staff members, partnerships with parents, and other stakeholders, interactions between staff and children in the setting all these are important factors that contribute to the overall quality of the setting. On the other hand when you think about the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being scale (SSTEW) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) both are used to assess the quality of setting however they both differ in their focus and scope. Therefore, it is recommended that early years setting should think about using two different scales to get an overall picture of the quality of their setting.

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