

Leadership for systems quality

Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines quality as something good or bad. When speaking about quality in the Early Years, Moss (2016) believes that quality is what everyone wants to offer.

When examining quality in the context of early years educational settings, there are three categories that one must consider. Eadie *et al*, (2022), describe structural quality, which looks at the learning environment and what is happening in the setting alongside the curriculum frameworks. Process quality looks at the interactions between the staff and children, children talking to their peers and the communication between stakeholders (Edwards, 2021, and Eadie *et al*, 2022). Piaget and Vygotsky both saw a more knowledgeable other as a supportive adult offering high-quality experiences that improve the children's development and learning outcomes (Mellatine, 2023). System quality is the legislation and standards set by governing institutions, such as the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2016), that a setting must abide by. Bonetti and Brown (2018) discuss the research of providing high-quality care in the Early Years ensuring that all elements of the macro level such as legislations, policies and procedures are in place (Ferdman, Prime, and Riggio, 2020). Williams (2016) adds that these macro-level assurances drive the structures and organisation of the setting that improves the quality.

Bonetti and Brown (2018) believe that to have the most impact on children's development, these systems of quality must work together. This is often referred to as the 'iron triangle' and if any one of these factors is weak, then standards of quality may be impacted.

High-quality childcare settings lay a strong foundation for children's future success. Moss (2016) sees quality as something that can be evaluated and is based on individual values and needs. Ofsted (2024) agrees and adds that providing high-quality early years education to all is important as not all children have the same home backgrounds. Therefore, high quality education and care enables all children to have the same start towards a successful future. Eadie *et al*, (2022) and Bonetti and Brown (2018) both state that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from high-quality childcare, stating that academic achievements and holistic

development were improved when compared to children not receiving the same quality of childcare.

High quality early years education has also proved to have long term benefits for children's development and can have as much of an impact on children's learning as a child in secondary school (Bonetti and Brown, 2018). This is supported by the Education Policy Institute (2018) who say that children who have access to quality childcare have improved holistic outcomes and have better cognitive skills from the quality experiences that develop and stimulate connections in the brain. It has also been shown that children have better social and emotional skills, can build healthy relationships and communicate effectively (Bonetti and Brown, 2018).

Reed and Canning (2012) say that improving quality is about being reflective and looking for ways to enhance, improve, and develop the setting to support the children. Measuring quality allows settings to evaluate what is being done well, can things be improved and what impact there is on the lives of the children (Bland, 2024). One way settings can measure quality in their setting is to use an Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale [hereafter ECERS] (Harms, Clifford and Cryer 2015). ECERS is an Early Years assessment tool used globally as an assessment tool (Environment rating scale (2025)). ECERS helps educators, administrators and policy makers to measure the learning environment, interactions and the overall quality of childcare being provided. ECERS consists of six key areas that are subdivided into thirty-five subscales. A rating scale, one to seven, is used for practitioners to rate themselves on these areas and the learning environment inside and outside the classroom. However, there can be inconsistencies between settings scores due to practitioners rating themselves and, therefore, potentially producing biased information and not showing a true reflection (Care Inspectorate Wales, n.d.).

ECERS allows settings to evaluate the space and furnishings of their setting.

Montessori teaching sees the space available to the children as a way to promote independence, providing furnishings that allow all children to be included and thrive (Cleaver, 2023). Additionally, Birth to Five Matters (n.d) agrees and adds that the area children have available allows them to feel nurtured and stimulates curiosity.

Another key area that ECERS looks at is the personal care routines that the settings have adopted. The National Minimum Standard 8 requires settings to write policies

and procedures to ensure quality childcare. This works alongside the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNICEF, 2022).

ECERS looks at the Language and Literacy development in the setting and the resources that the children have available to them. Practitioners must provide adequate resources that all children can learn and develop from and these resources must show diversity and cultural awareness. Garces-Bacsal. (2020) describes the importance for all children to have representation of themselves and to be able to identify and show respect and knowledge of other's differences and cultures. The environment must promote language and literacy skills in the form of print that develops early literacy skills. A high-quality setting also includes areas for children to have the experience of early writing. Barriers that settings may face against providing these resources include funding and the ability to source a good range of resources. Understanding how children learn through pedagogical awareness and the stages of development ensures that activities planned are catered for individual needs and have effective learning (Welsh Government, n.d).

The Learning Activities strand assesses the variety, quality, and accessibility of educational experiences available to children. Resources must encourage hands-on, exploratory learning, through play. Piaget's Preoperational Stage is where children need to be engaged in activities that they relate to and use from real-life experiences and objects (Kurt, 2020).

The interactions between the staff and the children are rated. Zaatari and Maalouf, (2022) discuss Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development and how the people around the child influence holistic development. High-quality interactions can be achieved by working alongside frameworks such as The New Curriculum (Welsh Government, 2022) and A Quality Framework for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care in Wales 2 (Welsh Government, n.d) and through child-centred learning, taking time to speak and listen to the children and asking open-ended questions that promote thinking skills.

The Program Structure strand is essential for maintaining an organised, child-centred, and inclusive early learning environment. However, proper training, staffing, and resources need to be in place for a setting to offer high-quality care.

ECERS helps to improve quality by looking at the strengths and weaknesses of the setting. Bland (2024) says that to develop practice, practitioners need to be able to critically evaluate what they are doing and give constructive feedback. To develop in this area, leaders must ensure that staff have the opportunity for professional development (Birth to five Matters (n.d).

To complete the ECERS assessment staff in the setting must be aware of how children learn (Howard, *et al*, 2018). Leaders must assess and train staff to observe what and how the children are learning and offer ways that can develop both themselves and the children (Crosse, 2013).

The process of completing the ECERS is time-consuming and can be quite complicated but there is additional information that helps to clarify ratings. The final rating offers positive feedback and gives goals on how they can achieve a higher quality setting. However, there can be inconsistencies between settings due to personal perception and the knowledge that the person conducting the ECERS has (Neitzel *et al.*, 2019).

The children's well-being is not accessed in the ECERS tool as it focuses on the environment, rather than looking at the individual needs of the children. The ECERS does not work alongside the Welsh Government's goal of well-being and development goal of children's care and learning in Wales (Welsh Government, n.d).

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being [hereafter SSTEWE] Scale (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015) is a tool designed to assess and enhance the quality of interactions in early childhood education settings for children aged two to six years. The SSTEWE Scale emphasises the importance of sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being in developing children's cognitive and social development (Brodie, K. 2015). The SSTEWE Scale is an early-year's assessment tool that looks at the quality of the environment and social and emotional child development

The SSTEWE scale uses five subscales:

Building Trust, Confidence, and Independence: Evaluates the extent to which practitioners create a secure environment that encourages children to develop self-assurance and autonomy. The theorist Erikson believed that building trust,

confidence, and independence develops children's social interactions through supportive practitioners (Kurt, 2021).

Social and Emotional Well-being: Assesses how settings support children's social skills and emotional health, focusing on how settings promote positive interactions and emotional resilience. Bowlby saw the importance of building a secure attachment to a primary caregiver as being crucial to a child's emotional well-being. (The Attachment Project 2024). However, with so many Early years practitioners leaving the profession due to low wages and lack of professional development, these relationships are hard to build and maintain (Owston, Jones and Stanley, 2024).

Supporting and Extending Language and Communication: Looks at how practitioners enhance children's language development and communication skills through meaningful conversations and active listening. On a negative note, one must comment that this can be time-consuming and requires skilled practitioners to facilitate deep open ended questions. Owston, Jones and Stanley (2024) report that the level of qualified staff members in the Early Years has a detrimental effect on how settings offer quality childcare.

Supporting Learning and Critical Thinking: Looks at how practitioners stimulate children's cognitive development by encouraging problem-solving, reasoning, and reflective thinking. Practitioners need to be trained to complete the SSTEWS scale however, and this involves costs that some settings may not be able to afford due to funding issues (Argile, 2024).

Assessing Learning and Language: Focuses on the methods used to monitor and support children's progress in language and their learning, ensuring that assessments inform and improve pedagogical approaches. This method of questioning children may hinder some children's development. Children with additional learning needs with a language delay may find it harder to involve themselves, or children who have attention issues and cannot concentrate for long periods. Practitioners need to have the skills to be able to include the needs of all children, differentiating activities using resources such as props or visual aids, this is outlined in The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales (2021) (Welsh Government, 2021).

Both of these assessment tools are similar but they do have some differences. The ECERS-E focuses on curricular aspects, providing a detailed look at curriculum and staff having pedagogical knowledge on how to support children with early maths literacy, science and diversity/equity. The SSTEWS Scale however, focuses on the quality of interactions looking at cognitive and social-emotional development (Victorian Government, 2024). They both look at how learning is developed naturally across the curriculum and the environment (Howard *et al*, 2018).

ECERS is beneficial for assessing environmental quality (Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, 2015), while SSTEWS provides insight into cognitive and emotional engagement between children and practitioners (Brodie, 2015). Using both frameworks together can offer a comprehensive view of early years education quality. Welsh Government (n.d) believe that the Early Years is how children's lives are shaped for the future.

Using these tools to help measure quality, aids practitioners assess the quality of care and learning in the setting that goes above and beyond the expectations in frameworks and legislations (Action for Children, 2024).

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