

Welsh Government (2023) sets minimum standards as an acceptable level of quality that are reasonable and ethical. Children have the right to receive quality care that will meet their individual needs (UNCRC, no date). CQA (2024) and Mango (no date) state that quality is providing effective provision in the setting. Mango (no date) developed this stating that high quality is meeting the needs of the individuals by conforming to the requirements. According to Williams (2016) early years settings have policies and procedures in place to ensure quality is met, maintained and continuing to develop for on-going improvement. Eadie *et al.* (2020) reveals driving quality in early years relies on consistent evidence on 3 areas; structural, process and domain. Similarly Campbell *et al.*, (2008) Fox and Geddes (2016), Melhuish, *et al.*, (2015), Ramey and Ramey (2015) and Taggart *et al.* (2015) state providing an enabling environment with enabling practitioners will provide high quality early learning experiences that will enhance children's cognitive, language and social skills. This supports Bronfenbrenner (1967) theory that high quality environments are essential for children's holistic development. Nutbrown (2016) states that high quality early education and care has a lasting impact on children's learning and later development. Nutbrown (2016) argues that staff should provide high quality care with all the skills deemed necessary, with understanding being a crucial skill. Welsh Government (2023) national minimum standards state that 60% of staff have to have a qualification. Nutbrown (2016) argues that being qualified does not necessarily mean staff are equipped to provide high quality care. Furthermore Jones (2014) insists it is not just knowledge that can provide quality it is also experience. Nutbrown (2016) and Jones (2014) both suggest that in order for early years settings to provide high quality care, nursery settings should go beyond the minimum standards starting with training enthusiastic practitioners to understand their role. This will ensure high quality care is provided at the setting. Slaughter (2016) implies there is a variety of methods to measure quality in an early years setting. The best way is observational methods of interaction to provide both useful and reliable information to ensure the setting is providing the highest quality.

A method to ensure quality and go beyond national minimum standards is using the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWE) framework.

Hoare (no date) reveals the SSTEWS framework looks at the pedagogy within the early years setting. It emphasises the adult's role in supporting learning and development quality as well as interacting with the children. This supports Bowlby's attachment theory that a practitioner creating a strong relationship with the child allows the child to become confident in their learning to develop holistically (Pound, 2017). Hoare (no date) furthers this encouraging practitioners to understand SSTEWS in depth if they are going to implement it. SSTEWS is assessed on a 7 point scale starting with inadequate and the highest being excellent. The Care of Inspectorate Wales (CIW) (2016) Self Assessment Service Statement (SASS) states that during an inspection nursery settings should be aiming to achieve excellence.

According to Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2023) and Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) the SSTEWS framework emphasises the significance between practitioners and the child in the early years setting. SSTEWS highlights the significance of high quality interactions in order to enhance children's holistic well-being, especially emotional. Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2016) states settings who carry out a SSTEWS create positive relationships between the practitioner and the child. To achieve excellence on the SSTEWS scale staff should be interacting with children, praise where necessary or if they have done the wrong thing, work with the child to problem solve a resolution to overcome the issue (Hoare, no date). Also known as restorative practice. Furthermore Howard *et al.* (2020) states the SSTEWS framework will encourage staff to promote children discussing their feelings with patience and pauses for the child to talk, developing their confidence and self-esteem. This will encourage the child to talk and listen. Engaging in this with the child will achieve an excellent SSTEWS scale going above and beyond the national minimum standards. On the other hand Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2016) reveals it does not provide sufficient guidance on how to assess and promote these aspects effectively. Melhuish *et al.* (2008) and Paez (2015) imply SSTEWS does not meet the diverse needs and backgrounds of children in early years settings, potentially leading to a one-size-fits-all approach that leads to potential bias or overlooks individual differences and cultural contexts.

Sylva, *et al.* (2011) and Siraj, *et al.* (2019) encourage practitioners to understand the child's individual needs and interests of each child promoting a responsive and

child-centred interaction. Developing this Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2023) state SSTEWE prioritises creating a nurturing and safe environment that supports the children's emotional development and resilience. Providing high quality care environments increases the child's individual needs and development (Ramsey and Ramsey, 2015. and Fox and Geddes, 2016). Indeed this will enable high quality interactions however Sylva (2011) and Howard *et al.* (2020) suggest assessing the quality of SSTEWE interactions can be subjective because the interactions can provide variations in interpretations and evaluations. Moreover Siraj *et al.* (2016) states there can be implementation challenges because some practitioners may find SSTEWE challenging to implement as it is hard to consistently carry out due to lack of time and support.

SSTEWE supports the curriculum for funded-non maintained nursery settings because it enhances and promotes cognitive development by promoting critical thinking, problem solving and language development through sustained shared thinking interactions (Sira et al., 2019 and Welsh Government, 2022). SSTEWE is split into 5 sub headings, one being supporting learning and critical thinking (Hoare, no date). The main priority of the curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings is to provide high quality care that meets the holistic needs of the individual child therefore SSTEWE supports this. Kingston and Siraj (2017) state adult interactions score higher when they include parents to continue critical thinking at home. Welsh government (2022) states in the curriculum for adults to have a positive relationship with parents and carers. But Wood (2023) can be argued that SSTEWE contradicts the curriculum because the SSTEWE framework may prioritise adult-led play whereas the curriculum promotes and encourages child-led play. This will limit the child from creating authentic and meaningful learning and prevent their autonomy and exploration. However Hoare (no date) suggests SSTEWE practitioners can provide open-ended, accessible resources and flexible, quiet space which does link back to the curriculum. Hoare (no date) recommends planning at the moment to implement SSTEWE. Ephgrave (2018), Ephgrave (2020) and Hoare (no date) state children are learning at the moment. Through high quality observations of the child the adult can create meaningful interactions. This could be recorded on a learning journey. Ephgrave (2018) and Barber and Paul-Smith (2010) state focusing on meaningful observations with each child enables teachable moments that tailor to the unique

child. This is done simply through observing the child, assessing whether it would be beneficial or not to create teachable moments or if it would just interrupt play. Then plan for future development. An individualised high quality learning journey will connect the SSTEW framework and the curriculum framework together as well as develop adult interactions with the child. This is evidence of high quality care being carried out.

SSTEW creates a positive relationship between the adult and the child through high quality interactions. It focuses on the individual child's well-being and promotes high quality care. Evaluating the framework is beneficial to highlight areas that might need extra quality.

Another way to encourage and promote high quality in early years setting is using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS). This is created in order to assess provision for children from 30 months to 5 years old (Slaughter, 2016). Cryer, Clifford and Harms (2014) and Hoare (no date) both state ECERS measures the quality of adult interactions with the children as well as the quality of environmental provision in order to meet the needs of the children and ensure high quality care is provided. Slaughter (2016) indicates ECERS are a consistent method to provide high quality in the setting. Hoare (no date) states ERS is rated using a scale from 1 to 7 that ranges from inadequate to excellent. Cryer, Clifford and Harms (2014) reveal ECERS framework includes tools for identifying strengths in the early years settings and highlighting areas for improvement. They are often used for program evaluation, quality improvement initiatives, and research purposes. This encourages high quality and standards. Carrying out ECERS in a nursery setting is going beyond minimum standards. are tools used to assess the quality of early childhood environments.

ECEPT (2018) value the enabling environment. It is looked at as a bonus practitioner with welcoming ques and equipped for a purpose. Cong-Lem (2022) and Pound (2017) reveal Vygotsky's theory that the environment influences the child in a variety of ways. Therefore providing a high quality environment is going to provide high quality learning through meaningful play. Implementing ECERS will provide a comprehensive assessment of various environmental factors crucial for children's development, including space, materials, activities, and interactions (Harms, Clifford

and Cryer, 2014). Douglas (2005) and Helburn, (1995) argues ECERS potentially lacks cultural sensitivity as it does not capture the diversity of early years environments. This can be seen as a biased assessment. Helburn (1995) states that due to lack of diversity ECERS might not be applicable to all settings.

Kazmierska-Kowalewska *et al.*, (2021) Harms, Clifford and Cryer (2014) and Sylva *et al.* (2011) state ECERS is a reliable and valid framework. This highlights if a setting implements ECERS it is likely to be a high quality setting with high quality provision taking place (Allen, *et al.* 2019). Welsh Government (2022) curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings highlights the significance of an enabling environment in early years. The ECERS will support the curriculum ensuring there is a high quality enabling environment such as such as loose parts to allow the child to determine their own learning and begin to understand the world (Ephgrave, 2020). Similarly Harms, Clifford and Cryer (2014) and Sylva *et al.* (2011) implies ECERS offers a standardised framework for evaluating the quality of early years settings. This can help highlight the strengths of the setting whilst suggesting how to facilitate quality improvement. Mehuish *et al.* (2015) indicates consistent method ensures there is reliability and comparability across the settings making it a valuable framework. However Brunsek *et al.* (2017) questions whether there is other research to support the reliability. Fujisawa, Fukai and Nakamuro (2023) furthers this stating the research into the success of ECERS has not been done on a large scale. Kärrby, G. and Giota, J. (1995) and Fujisawa, Fukai and Nakamuro (2023) states ECERS does not specify how much practitioners should write creating an interpreting error. Staff will need to be trained on ECERS. Implementing this will require time, resources and training (Helburn, 1995). Nevertheless meeting the individual needs of the child is the main role of an early years setting (Ephgrave, 2020) therefore if ECERS will develop the quality of this, spending the time and money on training can be deemed as necessary.

Moreover, the ECERS facilitates communication and collaboration among educators, administrators, and policymakers to discuss environmental quality (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014 and Howard *et al.* 2020) Additionally, according to Harms, Clifford and Cryer (2014), Fujisawa, Fukai and Nakamuro (2023) and Sylva *et al.* (2011) research has shown that programs rated higher on the ECERS tend to have more

child holistic development. This demonstrates the significance ECERS has in promoting quality early childhood education and care. On the one hand, Early *et al* (2018) and Kazmierska-Kowalewska *et al.*, (2021) found although ECERS proved successful in providing learning opportunities, practitioner interactions and gross motor skills, but on the other hand found that ECERS did not find associations with growth in early academics and social skills. Lehl and Smidt (2020) argue ECERS places too much emphasis on structural elements and may lack adequately capture the quality of teacher-child interactions, which are critical for children's development.

Overall ECERS contribute and encourage high quality early years education and care by offering a systematic way to assess and enhance environmental quality. Considering the negatives help highlight areas of development to provide continual development. It is likely that a setting with the ECERS framework in place will have better outcomes for their children.

Both the SSTEW and ECERS ratings are ensuring quality care is implemented above minimum standards. They are put in place to help the holistic well-being of the child through scaling between 1-7. Similarly they both highlight strengths and weaknesses of a setting and promote high quality interactions between the adult and the child. However both frameworks can be subject to observer bias and interpretation which could provide inconsistencies and lack diversity. To overcome this settings should ensure they are meeting UNCRC (no date) rights of a child to respect and celebrate each individual child by providing high quality care. Both methods would require staff training but this is always the case for professional development.

Overall, including the SSTEW and ECERS framework in an early years setting is beneficial because they promote high quality care and encourage continuous development.

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