

**Module: ECEY6011****Leadership and management for systems of quality****Reflective Paper****Contents:**

| Page Number/s: | Contents:        |
|----------------|------------------|
| 2              | AI Declaration   |
| 3-8            | Reflective Paper |
| 9-13           | Reference List   |

**AI Declaration -**

I acknowledge the use of Google Scholar [<https://scholar.google.com/>] between period:

(02/03/2026) - (26/03/2026) to help search for relevant academic journals and literature which are not always available via the university online library.

The following prompt themes were used:

- *Quality assessment in Early Years Education and Care*
- *Measuring quality in EYEC*
- *Research re. SSTEW Environmental Rating Scale in EYEC*
- *Research re. ECERS Environmental Rating Scale in EYEC*

I confirm that I have not presented any other AI generated text as my own work. I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide as evidence.

### **Quality in Early Years Education and Care**

Quality in Early Years education and care is often described as important, but research shows that it is a matter of complex debate. Moss (2016) argues that quality should not be seen as a neutral, technical idea that can be easily measured. Instead, it is shaped by particular values, beliefs, and political decisions about the purpose of early childhood education. Campbell-Barr and Bogatić (2017) make a similar point, saying that global interest in improving early childhood education and care is often guided by narrow ideas about an investment in and for the future of society. This affects how local services, families, and children are viewed and understood. Palaiologou (2023) also argues that there is no single definition of quality and warns that using one universal idea may ignore the unique social context of individual settings. At a global level, Raikes *et al.*, (2023) also show that efforts to monitor access to quality early childhood care and education are made harder by inconsistent definitions, unequal data systems, and challenges in making comparisons between places and settings. Together, these sources suggest that quality assurance is not just about measuring an agreed idea of quality - it also depends on which parts of early childhood education and care are considered important.

Early childhood research agrees that the assessment of quality is important and often distinguishes between the quality of structure and the quality of process. Structural quality usually includes things like staff ratios, staff qualifications, group size, leadership, working conditions, and safety. Process quality focuses more on pedagogy, interactions, relationships, and children's daily experiences (Bonetti and Brown, 2018; Palaiologou, 2023; Eadie *et al.*, 2024). This distinction is helpful, but it should not be seen as too fixed. Structural conditions influence process quality rather than working separately from it (Bonetti and Brown, 2018; Sluiter *et al.*, 2025). This is an important consideration for this reflective paper as it shows that no single approach can ensure all aspects of quality. Statutory regulation may be especially important for structural conditions, but the research is more cautious about whether legal requirements in themselves can provide responsive pedagogy, strong relationships, or meaningful professional reflection (Palaiologou, 2023; Eadie *et al.*, 2024; Sluiter *et al.*, 2025).

There is strong evidence showing that quality matters. The EPPSE project found that higher quality Early Years education and care provision was linked to better later achievement and social development, with these effects still noticeable in adolescence (Taggart *et al.*, 2015). The REPEY study also identified features of effective early years settings, including shared thinking, formative

assessment, a balance of child-led and adult-guided activities, and qualified practitioners who can extend children's thinking (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002).

Tayler (2015) argues that children's everyday experiences and relationships are at the heart of early learning and of wider processes of 'learning to be'. More recently, Sluiter *et al.*, (2025) found further support for this view, showing that process quality is a small but meaningful predictor of children's socio-emotional development over time. Longitudinal research from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) indicates that both childhood experiences and their quality contribute to later development (Bleil *et al.*, 2023). However, as further research suggests, the effects are usually modest and are influenced by wider family and child factors (Von Suchodoletz *et al.*, 2023). These studies do not settle the debate about what *quality* means, but they do show that it has important effects on children's experiences and outcomes.

All the above help explain why statutory requirements, while necessary, may be insufficient. Regulation, registration, and inspection are important because they establish baseline expectations around safety, legal compliance, and minimum provision. In Wales, however, the 2014 Independent Review argued that regulation alone could not secure broader quality improvement and recommended a Single Quality Framework, and clearer expectations and a stronger workforce development across the sector (Welsh Government, 2014). Macdonald (2018) similarly suggests that the separation of care and education in Wales has contributed to fragmentation in policy, curriculum, and professional development. Stewart, MacDonald and Waters-Davies (2024) explain that, in Wales, early childhood education faces a gap between what policy promises and what happens in practice. In a review of Estyn and CIW's joint inspection arrangements, Dudley and Thomas (2024) suggest that the system needs to be better aligned with the curriculum and the wider quality framework for early childhood play, learning, and care. These sources show that regulatory inspection is still important, but they also suggest that quality improvement relies on other approaches that support reflection, improved collaborative working, professional learning, and development.

This paper argues that other methods of quality assurance are valuable because they address aspects of practice that statutory compliance on its own may not reach. To explore this, two examples of quality assurance environmental rating scales will be explored.

### **Method 1: The SSTEW Scale**

The SSTEW Scale was developed to measure interactional quality, emphasising how adults support children's thinking, problem-solving, language development, and emotional wellbeing (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). It focuses on the everyday pedagogical practices, including questioning, modelling, responsiveness, and scaffolding that research shows, support high-quality learning experiences for children (Kangas *et al.*, 2021). The scale was introduced following research showing that process quality, especially the quality of adult–child interactions, is a highly influential factor in children's development (Howard *et al.*, 2020). The SSTEW tool is split into five subscales covering building trust, socio-emotional wellbeing, language and communication, critical thinking, and assessment. These areas directly address elements of practice linked to better child outcomes, including improved language, numeracy, and self-regulation (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). Importantly, the scale looks beyond things like staff ratios or available resources and instead focuses on how adults and children work together to build learning (Howard *et al.*, 2020).

### ***Use of SSTEW Data and its Role in Driving Quality***

Settings use SSTEW data to identify strengths and gaps in pedagogical practice. Waters & MacDonald (2022) describe how a Welsh local authority used SSTEW to target professional learning after the scale revealed weaknesses in children's opportunities for conceptual thinking and problem solving across multiple settings. These observations helped the local authority create a targeted training programme which helped practitioners promote children's curiosity, early scientific thinking, and problem solving by using activities and language that promoted further thinking. This aligns strongly with the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which proposes that children learn most effectively when adults scaffold learning beyond their current capabilities (Howard *et al.*, 2020; MacBlain, 2018; Aubrey and Riley, 2016).

The SSTEW scale also gives narrative detail as well as scores, for example written notes describing what the adult said or did during an interaction, which helps practitioners reflect on specific moments in their practice. This then makes it easier for practitioners to talk together about the quality of their practice and improve how they use questioning, modelling, and shared thinking with children (Howard *et al.*, 2020).

### ***Advantages and Limitations***

A key strength of the SSTEW scale is its focus on interactional quality, which research consistently identifies as an important predictor of child outcomes (Howard *et al.*, 2024; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015; Vinokic *et al.*, 2024). SSTEW also allows for identification of more detailed aspects of teaching that other assessment tools may not measure, as well as supporting professional learning by providing clear feedback which can directly support pedagogical improvement (Waters and MacDonald, 2022). These advantages support both older theories such as Vygotsky, as well as more contemporary childhood theorists such as Stephen Bavolek and Julie Fisher, who agree with the importance of communication and child-focused practice in education and care (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022).

There are, however, noted limitations of the SSTEW Scale as a tool for quality enhancement in childcare settings. Waters and MacDonald, 2022, discuss the subjective nature of the SSTEW scale, as the practitioners' ability to judge the quality of an interaction with a child relies heavily on the expertise and experience of the adult which could make interpretation and consistency a challenge (Waters and MacDonald, 2022). The same research also highlights the potential for practitioners to perform or carry out their role differently when they know they are being observed, which can hinder the authenticity of the findings, a trait which is often referred to as the 'Hawthorne Effect' (Festinger and Katz, 1953). Further criticism could be that the scale pays little attention to the structural elements of a provision, for example assessing the environment and implications of the physical surroundings and opportunities available to its users.

### **Method 2: The ECERS Scale**

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales consisting of the ECERS-R and ECERS-3 tools assess environmental and organisational aspects of provision (Hestenes *et al.*, 2019). Historically, ECERS has been widely used in research, policy, and quality rating systems across the world (Neitzel *et al.*, 2019). Although the assessment of interactions is included, the ECERS scale focuses more on the structural quality assurance considerations, which include assessment of safety, resource availability, and environmental factors.

### ***Use of ECERS Data and its Role in Driving Quality***

The ECERS scale provides data in the form of numerical scores, from one to seven (*low to high quality*), that can be easily interpreted by its users. It is helpful for practitioners, leaders and regulators to monitor childcare provision that includes assessments that monitor improvement, benchmark standards of quality, identify areas needing improvement, highlight challenges, as well as providing evidence that assist in compliance requirements for inspections (Alpys and Hernández-Torrano, 2025). Setodji *et al.*, 2018 describe the use of the ECERS-R and ECERS-3 in contexts which influence quality rating systems and funding decisions.

### ***Advantages and Limitations***

Neitzel *et al.*, 2019 highlight an advantage of the ECERS assessment as being its ability to offer clear and standardised measures which can support consistency of scoring and accurate understanding of data. It also allows the assessor to undertake a comprehensive review of the structural elements of a setting, including environmental factors and daily routines which can then be analysed in a systematic way. In addition to this, owing to the longevity of the ECERS tool and its implementation in large scale assessments, it has an international reputation for being a reliable method of quality evaluation.

Despite this, research highlights several limitations of the ECERS assessment tool. Gordon *et al.*, 2015 discuss the ECERS assessment scores as having modest associations with, and a poor ability to predict, children's future performance and development. The work of Cassidy *et al.*, (2005, cited in Setodji *et al.*, 2018, p.159) further criticises the tool as having too much focus on the assessment of materials and environment rather than the teaching provided and learning gained by the children.

Another consideration is that the minimum scores from ECERS assessments might not be based on what studies show actually works for children's development. For example, Setodji *et al.*, 2018 found that children's outcomes stop improving once ECERS-R scores reached about 3.4. This raises doubts about using higher score requirements for important decisions. Neitzel *et al.*, 2019 also highlight the difference between the ECERS-3 and ECERS-R assessments in that they analyse different aspects of quality provision, with little correlation between them. They, therefore, need to be treated as separate tools.

### ***Comparison and Conclusion***

Both the SSTEWS and ECERS scale tools provide Early Years settings an additional method of capturing valuable quality assessment insights which can support improvements, which go above statutory requirements. However, as discussed above, there are distinct differences to the criteria the tools explore. The SSTEWS scale captures the lived experience of learning which focuses on the interactions between practitioners and children. The focus on relationships, sustained shared thinking and sensitive pedagogy support children's learning experiences and wellbeing, as well as aligning with the theoretical explorations of Vygotsky. In contrast, the ECERS scale audits an environmental and structural view of a setting which captures an assessment of the organisational conditions for learning and development. However, research shows that there are limitations to both methods of assessment. One shared challenge may be the fast-changing nature of education and Early Years care, and the difficulty for measurement scales to keep pace with emerging evidence about what quality includes and how it should be assessed. Alpys and Hernández-Torrano (2025) argue that rating scales should not be treated as fixed measures, but as tools that need ongoing validation as concepts of quality develop. A further consideration is whether general quality measures fully capture difference and inclusion across diverse learning needs. Soukakou (2024) argues, high quality inclusive early childhood provision depends on responsive environments, interactions, and practices that support each child equitably, which may not always be fully captured by broad rating scales.

In conclusion, the complex and contextual nature of both individual Early Years care and education providers, as well as the subjective nature of quality assessment itself, it might not be ideal to rely on one single isolated tool to monitor quality and improvement. By using different tools, settings can observe different elements of both structural and process quality which can allow for a broader, more holistic understanding of the care and education provided grounded in both theory and practice (Waters and MacDonald, 2022).

**References:**

- Alpys, A. and Hernández-Torrano, D. (2025) 'Scoping review of early childhood environment rating scale (ECERS): Assessing and validating quality in early childhood education settings', *Early Education and Development*, 37(3), pp.644-664. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2025.2585294>
- Aubrey, K. and Riley, A. (2016) *Understanding & using educational theories*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Bleil, M.E., Roisman, G.I., Gregorich, S.E., Appelhans, B.M., Hiatt, R.A., Pianta, R.C., Marsland, A.L., Slavich, G.M., Thomas, A.S., Yeung, W.S. and Booth-LaForce, C. (2023) 'Thirty-year follow-up of the NICHD study of early child care and youth development (SECCYD): the challenges and triumphs of conducting in-person research at a distance', *BMJ Open*, 13(3), p.e066655. Available at: <https://doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2022-066655>
- Bonetti, S., and Brown, K. (2018) *Structural elements of quality early years provision: a review of the evidence*. Available at: [https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Early-years-structural-quality-review\\_EPI.pdf](https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Early-years-structural-quality-review_EPI.pdf). (Accessed: 8 March 2026).
- Bradbury, A. and Swailes, R. (2022) *Early childhood theories today*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Campbell-Barr, V. and Bogatić, K. (2017) 'Global to local perspectives of early childhood education and care', *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(10), pp.1461-1470. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1342436>
- Dudley, G. and Thomas, W. (2024) *Review of estyn and care inspectorate wales' joint inspection arrangements: executive summary*. Available at: <https://www.careinspectorate.wales/sites/default/files/2024-08/240829-independent-review-joint-inspection-estyn-ciw-exec-summary-en.pdf> (Accessed: 15 March 2026).

- Eadie, P., Page, J., Levickis, P., Elek, C., Murray, L., Wang, L. and Lloyd-Johnsen, C. (2024) 'Domains of quality in early childhood education and care: a scoping review of the extent and consistency of the literature', *Educational Review*, 76(4), pp.1057-1086. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2022.2077704>
- Festinger, L., and Katz, D. (1953) *Research methods in the behavioral sciences*. Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press.
- Gordon, R.A., Hofer, K.G., Fujimoto, K.A., Risk, N., Kaestner, R. and Korenman, S. (2015) 'Identifying high-quality preschool programs: new evidence on the validity of the early childhood environment rating scale–revised (ECERS-R) in relation to school readiness goals', *Early Education and Development*, 26(8), pp.1086-1110. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2015.1036348>
- Hestenes, L. L., Rucker, L., Wang, Y. C., Mims, S. U., Hestenes, S. E., & Cassidy, D. J. (2019) 'A comparison of the ECERS-R and ECERS-3: different aspects of quality?', *Early Education and Development*, 30(4), 496–510. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2018.1559681>
- Howard, S.J., Siraj, I., Melhuish, E.C., Kingston, D., Neilsen-Hewett, C., De Rosnay, M., Duursma, E. and Luu, B. (2020) 'Measuring interactional quality in pre-school settings: introduction and validation of the sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing (SSTEWE) scale', *Early Child Development and Care*. 190(7), pp. 1017- 1030. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1511549>
- Howard, S.J., Lewis, K.L., Walter, E., Verenikina, I. and Kervin, L.K. (2024) 'Measuring the quality of adult–child interactions in the context of ECEC: a systematic review on the relationship with developmental and educational outcomes', *Educational Psychology Review*, 36(1), p.6. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-023-09832-3>
- Kangas, J., Ukkonen-Mikkola, T., Harju-Luukkainen, H., Ranta, S., Chydenius, H., Lahdenperä, J., Neitola, M., Kinos, J., Sajaniemi, N. and Ruokonen, I. (2021) 'Understanding different approaches to ECE pedagogy through tensions', *Education Sciences*, 11(12), p.790. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11120790>
- MacBlain, S. (2018) *Learning theories for early years practice*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

- MacDonald, N. (2018) *The great divide: separation of care and education in wales an examination of policy, reform and research evidence*. Available at: <https://www.exchangewales.org/the-great-divide-separation-of-care-and-education-in-wales-an-examination-of-policy-reform-and-research-evidence/> (Accessed: 13 March 2026).
- Moss, P. (2016) 'Why can't we get beyond quality?', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 17(1), pp.8-15. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949115627895>
- Neitzel, J., Early, D., Sideris, J., LaForrett, D., Abel, M.B., Soli, M., Davidson, D.L., Haboush-Deloye, A., Hestenes, L.L., Jenson, D. and Johnson, C. (2019) 'A comparative analysis of the early childhood environment rating scale–revised and early childhood environment rating scale', *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 17(4), pp.408-422. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X1987301>
- Palaiologou, I (2023) "Early childhood provision, practice and quality: the ambiguity of the meaning of quality", *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 31(4), pp. 839–843. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2023.2275413>
- Raikes, A., Rao, N., Yoshikawa, H., Cohrssen, C., Behrman, J., Cappa, C., Devercelli, A., Lopez Boo, F., McCoy, D., Richter, L. (2023) 'Global tracking of access and quality in early childhood care and education', *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 17(1), p.14. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-023-00116-5>
- Setodji, C.M., Schaack, D. and Le, V.N. (2018) 'Using the early childhood environment rating scale-Revised in high stakes contexts: does evidence warrant the practice?', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 42, pp.158-169. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2017.10.001>
- Siraj, I., Kingston, D. and Melhuish, E. (2015) *Sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing (SSTEW) scale for 2–5-year-old provision*. London: Trentham Books.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. & Bell, D. (2002) *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years (REPEY)*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- Sluiter, R.M., Fukkink, R.G. and Fekkes, M. (2025) 'The impact of process quality in early childhood education and care on socio-emotional development: a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 22(5), p.775. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22050775>

- Soukakou, E., Dionne, C. and Palikara, O. (2024) *Promoting quality inclusion in early childhood care and education: Inclusive practices for each and every child*. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388851?posInSet=1&queryId=21bd6b6d-56ad-41ea-907e-35508c23a07e>. Accessed: 23 March 2026.
- Stewart, S., MacDonald, N. and Waters-Davies, J. (2024) 'Early childhood education in wales: policy, promises and practice realities', *Wales Journal of Education*, 26(2), pp.124-139. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.16922/wje.26.2.9>
- Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. & Siraj, I. (2015) *Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+): how pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time*. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a803cb240f0b62305b89fbf/RB455\\_Effective\\_pre-school\\_primary\\_and\\_secondary\\_education\\_project.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a803cb240f0b62305b89fbf/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf). (Accessed: 17 March 2026).
- Tayler, C. (2015) 'Learning in early childhood: experiences, relationships and 'learning to be'', *European Journal of Education*, 50(2), pp.160-174. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12117>
- Vinokic, K., Baron, F., Kunter, M., Linberg, A., Begrich, L. and Kuger, S. (2024) 'Using the thin slices technique to assess interactional quality in early childhood education and care settings', *Frontiers in Education*. Vol. 9, p. 1368503. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1368503>
- Von Suchodoletz, A., Lee, D.S., Henry, J., Tamang, S., Premachandra, B. and Yoshikawa, H. (2023) 'Early childhood education and care quality and associations with child outcomes: a meta-analysis', *Plos One*, 18(5), p.e0285985. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0285985>
- Waters, J. and MacDonald, N. (2022) 'Exploring the use of a rating scale to support professional learning in early years pre-school staff: the experience of one local authority in wales', *Early Years*, 42(3), pp.263-277. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2020.1742666>
- Welsh Government (2014) *Independent review of childcare and early education registration, regulation and inspection*. Available at:

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/independent-review-of-childcare-services.pdf>. (Accessed: 14 March 2026).