

ECEY6011

Leadership for Systems Quality

I have not used any AI in this assignment

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According to Moss (2016) quality in early years services is not an objective or universal concept and states it is a constructed and subjective idea shaped by people's values, beliefs and interests. The author points out different stakeholders such as parents, educators and policymakers can define and interpret quality in different ways. Therefore, what is considered quality in early childhood services often depends on the perspective of the observer, meaning it is largely in the eye of the beholder. Williams (2016) would agree and adds quality refers to the collection of policies, procedures, systems and practices both internal and external to an organisation designed to achieve, maintain and continuously improve standards and points out that practitioners should recognise quality as an ongoing process of enhancement. The author explains that quality in early childhood education and care is defined across three interconnected domains which are structural, process and system. In the same vein, Edwards (2021) and Eadie *et al.* (2022) state that quality in early childhood education and care can be defined across three interconnected domains which are structural, process and system. Both authors describe these areas and state structural quality includes measurable elements such as educator qualifications, ratios and the learning environment. They state process quality focuses on children's daily experiences including interactions, relationships and learning opportunities and state that system quality refers to broader policies, leadership and support structures that guide and maintain quality and suggest together these domains work to support positive outcomes for children and continuous quality improvement.

The Department for Education (2015) states the importance of quality in early years settings is strongly supported by research and points out studies such as the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education [hereafter EPPE] project demonstrates that high quality early education has long term positive impacts on children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Furthermore, they suggest neuroscience highlights that early experiences significantly shape brain development reinforcing the importance of providing stimulating and nurturing environments. They claim children who attend high-quality settings are more likely to achieve better educational outcomes and experience improved life chances. Siraj *et al.* (2019) would agree, however points out that there is still debate about what quality looks like in the

early years and suggests this is because different groups such as parents, educators and governments have different views. Statutory frameworks such as Care Inspectorate Wales [hereafter CIW] (2021) and Estyn (2024) set early years standards and inspection systems and establish minimum expectations of quality in a setting. These organisations are responsible for regulating, inspecting and evaluating early years provision to ensure that children receive safe, high quality care and education. For example, CIW (2021) focuses on areas such as safeguarding, staff suitability, leadership and the overall wellbeing of children, ensuring that providers meet legal requirements and promote positive outcomes. Similarly, Estyn (2024) carries out inspections to improve the quality of education and training for all learners in Wales. Their inspection approach focuses on evaluating how effectively providers support learners progress and development. Inspection reports highlight how well settings are performing, identifying strengths as well as areas that require improvement. Together, these frameworks support consistency across settings and encourage continuous professional development helping practitioners reflect on their practice and maintain standards that support children's learning, development and wellbeing. However, according to the OECD (2022) quality beyond regulations review highlights that improving early years quality involves more than simply meeting regulatory requirements and suggests that as a result many practitioners and settings turn to additional quality assurance tools and methods to enhance provision beyond these baseline standards.

This essay critically reflects on the benefits of using additional methods of measuring quality focusing specifically on the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing scale [hereafter SSTEWS] and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale [hereafter ECERS]. It will compare these tools, evaluate their strengths and limitations and consider how effectively they support continuous quality improvement.

According to Alpys and Hernandez-Torrano (2025) ECERS is widely used internationally to assess early years settings and claim that one key benefit of using tools such as ECERS is that it provides a structured and evidence based approach to evaluating quality and suggest this can support practitioners in identifying specific areas for improvement that may not be evident through informal reflection alone. It evaluates areas such as the environment, interactions, activities and programme

structure that provides a scoring system that identifies strengths and areas for development in both structural and process quality. However, according to Cade and Wardle (2022) although tools such as the ECERS are used to measure quality in early years settings they may not fully account for children's individual developmental needs. They argue that these tools can place less emphasis on theoretical perspectives such as Lev Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (cited in Smidt, 2009) which highlights the importance of supporting children through guided interaction to achieve tasks they would not be able to complete independently. In the same vein, a child-centred approach influenced by theorists such as Jean Piaget (1979) and Maria Montessori (cited in Frierson, 2025) emphasises children as active learners and focuses on meaningful learning experiences. However, the authors point out that the ECERS rating scales often overlook this holistic child focused perspective when assessing quality. In contrast, according to Siraj *et al.* (2015) the SSTEW scale focuses more specifically on the quality of interactions between practitioners and children. It emphasises the importance of sustained shared thinking where adults and children work together to solve problems and extend learning as well as emotional support and wellbeing. To support this view, Brunsek *et al.* (2017) suggest that although the ECERS provides a broad assessment of the learning environment, the SSTEW offers a more detailed understanding of pedagogical practice and the quality of relationships between practitioners and children.

According to Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2024) the SSTEW can help promote consistency in evaluation. They suggest that using standardised criteria reduces subjectivity and allows comparisons to be made over time or across different settings. This can be particularly useful for leaders who want to monitor progress and demonstrate improvement. In the same vein, Howard *et al.* (2018) states the SSTEW encourages practitioners to reflect on their interactions with children, helping them develop a deeper understanding and improve their practice. Research by Howard *et al.* (2018) supports this and claim higher scores on the SSTEW are achieved when practitioners know children well including their interests and achievements and point out that high quality settings also encourage children's curiosity, thinking and questioning and provide activities that are appropriately challenging. In contrast, Setodji *et al.* (2017) explain that the ECERS takes a broader

view of quality by assessing both structural elements such as space, resources and daily routines. The authors point out that its main strength is that it provides a comprehensive overview of the setting making it useful for identifying practical changes that can improve provision. However, note this broad focus can also be a limitation as ECERS may not fully capture the depth and quality of interactions between adults and children. For example, a setting may achieve a high score for its environment, resources and organisation but still lack high quality interactions that support children's learning and development.

In terms of practicality, Howard et al. (2018) suggest that the ECERS is more accessible for practitioners because it provides clear and concrete criteria. The authors claim the ECERS is generally easier for practitioners to use because it focuses on observable features and makes it more straightforward to assess and identify practical improvements and point out that the SSTEWS on the other hand requires a deeper understanding of pedagogy and may be more challenging to implement without training. In the same vein, Siraj, Kingston and Melhish (2024) would agree and suggest the SSTEWS can be more challenging to use and points out that without adequate training practitioners may struggle to apply the scale consistently. Furthermore, the authors claim another limitation of SSTEWS is that it can be time consuming.

According to the Department of Education (2017), both ECERS and SSTEWS have limitations in capturing children's personal experiences and suggest that while they measure observable signs of quality they may not fully show how children feel in the setting or what they value most about their experiences. They highlight the importance of using these tools alongside other forms of evaluation such as practitioner reflection, parental feedback and children's voices to gain a more comprehensive understanding of quality. In the same vein, Teach Early Years (2026) suggests that completing an assessment alone does not lead to improvement and points out that meaningful reflection and action are required to ensure quality. These views are underpinned by the Welsh Government (2022) Curriculum for Wales that puts emphasis on reflective practice and continuous improvement. The Curriculum for Wales (2022) encourages practitioners to listen to children's perspectives, adapt provision to meet individual needs and use ongoing evaluation to enhance learning experiences. This holistic approach supports the idea that quality cannot be

measured through observation tools alone but should also include children's experiences and practitioner reflection.

CIW (2026) highlights the importance of practitioners having a strong understanding of child development and using reflective processes to shape their provision and suggest by embedding thoughtful and responsive decision making into daily practice practitioners can adapt their approaches to better meet children's needs improving experiences and outcomes for all children. Furthermore, they state when practitioners engage in discussions around assessment findings they are encouraged to share perspectives and develop a shared understanding of quality. This collaborative approach can strengthen professional practice and promote continuous improvement across the setting. Birth to 5 Matters (2026) would agree and suggest quality improvement in early years settings is an ongoing process focused on improving outcomes for every child and point out that continuous improvement also depends on skilled and motivated practitioners who engage in ongoing professional development and reflection. Furthermore, they state practitioners should use observation, planning and review cycles to support children's progress, embed inclusive practice and promote sustained shared thinking. Working in partnership with families and other professionals further supports children's wellbeing and learning strengthening outcomes for all children (Welsh Government, 2022).

In conclusion, quality in early years education is complex and can be viewed differently depending on people's values and experiences. While organisations such as CIW and Estyn provide important minimum standards, research shows that high-quality provision requires more than simply meeting regulations. Additional tools such as ECERS and SSTEW can help settings reflect on their practice and identify areas for improvement. ECERS focuses on the learning environment and resources while SSTEW focuses more on interactions, emotional wellbeing and sustained shared thinking. Although both tools have some limitations using them together can give a more complete picture of quality. However, these tools are most effective when used alongside other methods such as practitioner reflection, children's voices and parental feedback. Continuous quality improvement depends on practitioners being willing to reflect, develop their skills and adapt their practice to meet children's individual needs. By using a range of quality assurance approaches, early years

settings can improve experiences for children and support better long-term outcomes.

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