

Quality is described in the Oxford learners dictionary (2022) as 'the standard of something when it is compared to other things like it, for example how good or bad something is'. However, according to Cottle and Alexander (2011) the concept of the term quality within early childhood education and care (ECEC) is seen as a disputable term. They state that there are a broad and varied number of people involved within the ECEC, sometimes referred to as stake holders who all have an important role in viewing the setting in question as high quality. Cottle and Alexander (2011) state that these various stakeholders have a broad and varied perspective view of quality which can be difficult to define. Howard *et al* (2018) agrees and suggests that for example, parents are more likely to view a quality setting as one in which their children's happiness and well-being are well catered for; compared to policy makers who are more likely to prioritise and view quality as a settings ability to offer support and guidance to parents and carers returning to work.

Moss (2016) believes that quality isn't a necessity in ECEC but a choice, he states that although settings are duty bound to meet the needs of children in accordance with the national minimum standards, quality is what the majority of settings work towards in order to offer the quality that service users are ultimately looking for. Although if quality is hard to define and within the eye of the beholder in ECEC then how do stakeholders define a high quality setting? According to Siraj *et al* (2019) the respective governments play a key role in imposing measures and processes in order to monitor and improve high quality settings for parents and children. They believe that frameworks and guidance implemented by different governments in different countries can differ in their approach to scrutinise high quality. For example, in the United Kingdom emphasis has been out on the overhaul of high quality learning opportunities through tailored and bespoke curriculum reforms (Parker, 2013). On the other hand, however, Siraj *et al* (2019) states that in Australia, the government set out its own bespoke National Quality Framework to create consistency of high quality across the Majority of ECEC settings.

The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years project (REPEY) was designed to identify the difference between a good and high quality setting. The project discovered that ultimately children made more progress in the setting where there

were increased high quality adult and child interactions. The study showed that there was an element of adult – child interactions observed in the settings classed as good quality, but compared to the settings classed as high quality, there was a significant rise in the sustained shared thinking interactions observed. The REPEY project believes that sustained shared thinking is invaluable to a child's learning development journey and enables children to extend their thinking (Blatchford, 2002). Similarly, Waibel (2021) suggests that sustained shared thinking is an important indicator of a high quality setting. She believes that these quality interactions are a vital factor for children to develop holistically and has a lasting impact on their learning and development journey.

The Effective Provision of preschool education project (EPPE) was the first major European study to focus on the effectiveness of ECEC. The study found that there are remarkable differences in the provision between individual preschool setting and their impact on children's development. The findings suggested that the settings deemed higher in quality were linked to more positive outcomes in children, for example better self-regulation, pro social behaviour and children showed lower levels of hyperactivity (Sylva *et al*, no date). The study also found that the most disadvantaged children benefited from high quality settings alongside the amount of staff being highly skilled and qualified. The Welsh Government (2014) agree, they state that through their free flying start programme, high quality provision is a core element and is integral to its success. They believe that in order to create an overall high quality experience for children then a high quality environment provided by high quality staff is key.

Pascal and Batram (2018) also acknowledge the importance of providing high quality provision in order to promote positive long term outcomes for children with a less advantaged back ground. They believe that practitioners should be actively reflect on their best practices and provision to build upon and lead to quality improvements. They suggest that high quality provision should not be seen as an ultimate goal that practitioners and settings should strive to achieve, but as a continuous journey to strive for consistent high quality practice.

Previous and in-depth research has shown that high quality interactions that support children's thinking and emotional well-being plays a vital role in a setting deemed 'high

quality'. Although it is suggested that the level and quality of these adult and child interactions can be difficult to identify and distinguish (Howard *et al* 2018). A measurement tool that is designed to identify the quality interactions of sustained shared thinking which support both social and emotional development and cognitive development is the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale (SSTEWS) (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish 2015). The SSTEWS scale is designed to solely focus on the pedagogical practices of practitioners in the setting and their role in supporting learning and development through the quality of their adult child interactions (Birth to Seven Matters, 2022). Similarly, Siraj *et al* (2019) agrees and states that the SSTEWS scale takes into consideration the practices observed that support children to develop their emotional well being and sustained shared thinking. However, Siraj *et al* (2015) states the importance of the SSTEWS scale being carried out and assessed by specifically trained individuals in order to have a clear understanding and make a professional judgement. This could be problematic in the use of the SSTEWS scale. If practitioners are using this scale for self-assessment and professional development, a lack of understanding could cause them to judge their setting as below the quality line or above it resulting in inaccurate results. Brodie (2015) believes that the SSTEWS scale can give a good indication on where the quality interactions lie on the subscale in order to build upon and enable the setting to raise their standards in terms of their sustained shared thinking and emotional well being. She states that using the practitioners professional judgement and observational skills are key in identifying where on the subscale the setting or professional practice is operating.

The method that the SSTEWS scale, as described by Siraj *et al* (2015), is designed to identify current subscales starting from the very first statement but stopping when a particular individual statement isn't reached. This could cause sustained shared thinking observations to be missed, when according to Howard *et al* (2018) the SSTEWS scale is not intended to show practitioners where they may be going wrong, but to bridge the gap and clarify understanding between theory and practice. Similarly, Bryce-Clegg (2018) agrees, stating that in order for practitioners to provide and offer opportunities to learn and develop they must first have a clear understanding of the pedagogical principles that underpin their practices.

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As stated by Welsh Government (2014) the key features of high-quality experiences for children are not only high quality interactions, or sustained shared thinking, but a high quality environment plays a vital role. The measurement tool Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is commonly used tool to measure high quality environments. These environmental scales have been used in research in many different countries with reports showing improvement in quality alongside evidence of positive outcomes for children (Clifford and Reszka, 2010). Paro *et al* (2012) agree and states that with the issue of quality so hard to define, the ECERS scale shows an insight into the quality of the learning environment. They describe the ECERS scale as one of the primary measures of quality in ECEC and is used as a foundation to build upon and create enabling environments for children to learn and develop.

Mariano *et al* (2019) suggests that the ECERS scale focuses on meeting children's needs within the environment, for example health and safety, opportunities for stimulation and hands on play and positive relationships. They suggest that this is the criteria that practitioners should fulfil in order to provide a quality setting. However, TES (2022) suggests that the ECERS measurement tool does not merely measure and observe what is physically present in the environmental space, but it identifies how children interact with the physical space ultimately linking practitioner, child and environment. They also suggest that through undertaking the ECERS scale, practitioners are able to distinguish and identify areas of their environment that need improvements. They believe that through using a measurement tool like ECERS within the team in a collaborative way, helps inform practice and can inspire a shared interest in creating an action plan to move forward with. TES (2022) suggest that by observing children in the environment and having a clear and consistent idea on what quality interactions look like in the environment, encourages practitioners to gain a clear picture on why and how the environment they provide is fundamental to children's development.

However, Douglas (2005) that the ECERS scale is only a tool to measure the environment not what individuals experience within it, he also believes that the ECERS scale can be unreliable. He states that for an environmental measurement tool to be successful and have validity it must measure an environment that is stable and not at risk of changing on a daily basis. This could have serious implications on the settings score validity as early years environments are ever changing and in fact encouraged.

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Practitioners are encouraged to move furniture and mix up the areas in order to keep children interested and uphold a level of excitement (EYC, no date).

(Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish 2015) state that the previous edition of the ECERS focused more on the physical aspects of the environment, however through research it has been revised and developed to adapt to incorporate areas of the curriculum, for example literacy, numeracy science and the environment. Although both the original and revised editions of ECERS both provide clarification measures of the physical environment alongside observing pedagogical and curricular practices.

Siraj *et al* (2015) suggests that by combining both of these measurement tools is valuable in the context of developing or assessing high quality. They believe that using these tools in partnership it categorises quality practice and pedagogy giving all stakeholders a complete picture of how high quality should look in in early education and care. Similarly, Kruty *et al* (2021) agree and states that a study in the Ukraine found the ECERS and SSTEWS methods of measurements complimented each other well. They suggest that both tools are effective in identifying gaps within a settings environment or provision, enabling practitioners to determine where practice can be improved and developed upon. Furthermore, the SSTEWS Scale itself is recommended to be used as a companion tool used alongside another measurement tool such as ECERS in order to gain a clearer complete picture. Alongside this the SSTEWS scale and ECERS as measurement tools complement each other well and use a similar style format in which could encourage practitioners to use them both together in order to get a holistic view of their professional development or setting (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish 2015).

In my current job role, it is my responsibility to plan and provide the provision for my 22 Nursery class children aged between 3-4. I have always been aware that the enhanced and continues provision I provide needs to be of high quality and offer opportunities for play based activities. However, by looking in depth through this module at what quality is and how it might look like in an early year setting has completely overturned my opinion on how quality should look in my setting.

Through my research I have found that high quality settings with high quality environments and quality higher interactions between adults and children, referred to as sustained shared thinking, enables children to achieve better outcomes and long-

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term attainment. Through my research of the ECERS and SSTEW scales I have come to the conclusion that by being mindful of and incorporating both of these into my setting it could improve my future practice.

Previously my provision would be provided with the children's interests and their pupil voice being the main driving force behind it. Although there would always be an element of the skills and outcomes for the Foundation Phase and LNF incorporated in order to evidence and tick off specific skills. However, now I feel that my planning should take into considerations more opportunities for sustained shared thinking to take place, I feel that by planning and providing these environments with the intent to create opportunities for these valuable learning methods to be the way forward for me. Through researching the SSTEW scale it has giving me insight and provided me with support materials that coincide with the subscales, enabling me to identify gaps and build upon my professional practice in order to ensure I am providing the children in my setting with high quality environments and interactions.

I feel that although the SSTEW scale is not used as a measuring tool at my setting, I could use it in future practice to enhance my professional development. I think by looking at the scale from the very beginning and working up to an excellent point of interactions will enable me as practitioner to understand and ensure I am providing a high quality and enriching opportunities for SST within planned activities. I also think this kind of practice will ensure, I as team leader, within my setting have a clear picture and have the confidence to lead my team into high quality interactions of SST which I think will benefit all.

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