

I acknowledge the use of Microsoft Editor on 30th March to spellcheck my work. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work.

This essay will discuss the importance of quality in settings and critically analyse two types of quality assurance methods using the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being [SSTEW] scale and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale [ECERS]. Benefits and limitations of these scales will be discussed and compared with each other to assess how quality is assured in settings.

Quality Assurance in early childhood education can be defined as a high standard of care, education and environment provided to young children ensuring positive learning experiences and the best start in life (Welsh Government, 2023a). This is governed by the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2023b) by setting out indicators for practitioners to ensure they provide quality care with a focus on the environment, children's well-being and practitioners qualifications (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025). Children who attend high quality settings will enhance their skills such as social, emotional, and cognitive development leading to better outcomes which will support lifelong learning in future years (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2023). Research by Flying Start (2017) has indicated that early intervention and high-quality provision can reduce inequalities, particularly for disadvantaged children. Moreover, building strong relationships with parents can all contribute to the learning outcomes for children. This is stated in the EPPE report (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) to build a strong foundation for children's future learning.

According to Cottle and Alexander (2012) children having access to high quality provision will enhance their learning outcomes, allowing children to be ready to transition to school and achieve future success. By using Quality Assurance schemes in settings, practitioners can assess what is working well and what improvements need to be made to keep high quality standards. This was emphasised by the Labour Government who recognised the importance of quality childcare in the early years provision to reduce poverty (Early Education, 2020). Funding was allocated to preschool education to further enhance the quality of care (Leana, Appelbaum and

Shevchuk, 2009) and narrow the attainment gap giving equal opportunities for all children to begin their education as young as possible (Howard *et al.*, 2018).

Additionally, as stated by Social Care Wales (2025) settings are responsible for promoting high standards across the workforce. This ensures practitioners have the right skills and qualifications to work to a high standard of professionalism, providing high quality care and service. This is also stated in the National Minimum Standards:13 (Welsh Government, 2023b) where 80% of staff should hold a level 2 qualification and at least half of these have a level 3. High quality childcare produces long term benefits for children's development, and this can lead further into their lives for a successful future (Welsh Government, 2024). This is particularly important for those children from disadvantaged backgrounds where quality care and education can reduce the effects of poverty and provide parents with access to multi-agencies to support early intervention for children's development (Welsh Government, 2023c).

The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale [ECERS] and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being [SSTEW] scale are both widely used tools for assessing the quality of early childhood education settings. While both aim to enhance children's learning and development, they differ significantly in their focus of evaluating early year settings.

ECERS is an environmental rating scale designed to assess the quality of early years relationship between setting quality and child development. This scale evaluates children's interactions, the environment, routines and learning activities to determine how well they support children's well-being, learning and development with a focus on process quality (Clifford *et al.*, 2021; Bonetti and Brown, 2018). The evaluation focuses on children's experiences within the setting and how these impact their cognitive development, observing both their interactions socially and with the physical environment (Brunsek *et al.*, 2017). This is used by practitioners to assess the quality of the settings, identifying strengths and areas of improvement for the environment and children's learning development (Sylva *et al.*, 2006).

Over time, ECERS has undergone several revisions with ECERS-3 being the most recent version (Environmental Rating Scales Institutes, 2025). For the purpose of this essay, ECERS-3 will be discussed as it has added a focus on social interactions as well as greater attention to learning activities and experiences rather than the environment alone in determining quality (Clifford, Cryer and Harms, 2014). The assessment involves a three-hour observation, followed by a scoring process. There are seven outcomes in the scales giving an overall quality rating ranging from inadequate to excellent (Glenn, 2018).

One advantage of the [ECERS] is that it offers a structured framework for self-assessment, enabling practitioners to reflect on their practice and improve outcomes for children. According to Welsh Government (2023d) reflective practice allows setting and practitioners to develop a clear understanding of what is needed to achieve quality and progress the learning of children. Welsh Government (2023f) and Gibbs (1988) suggests reflection should be an ongoing process to assess strengths and areas of improvement to develop as professionals and to improve outcomes for children. Additionally, research supports the correlation between high [ECERS] scores and positive child development outcomes, validating its effectiveness as a trusted, assessment tool ensuring high quality standards are consistently maintained (Clifford *et al.*, 2021; Peterson and Elan, no date). This is supported by the popularity of the scales with a vast majority of settings, over the world, using this tool for evaluating quality (Early *et al.*, 2018). The framework also plays a role in regulations, compliance and inspections ensuring that the standards are met and upheld while providing accountability for making decisions and policies (Welsh Government, 2014 and Moss, 2016).

Despite its strengths, [ECERS] has several limitations. One drawback is its inability to account for cultural variations as the indicators may not align with the diverse needs of the children and environment (Early *et al.*, 2018). Research conducted in America on the effectiveness of process quality shows results cannot be generalised to other countries (Educational Policy Institute, 2018). Therefore, adaptations may be needed to implement it into other countries (Garvis *et al.*, 2017) ensuring equality where used.

Moreover, the observation process does not provide a continuous assessment being completed at intervals throughout the year which may lead to an inaccurate representation of the setting's overall quality (Gordon *et al.*, 2012). Another criticism is that [ECERS] can sometimes become a checklist approach rather than reflecting the quality of teaching and learning (Messan-Setodji, Schaack and Vi-Nhuaun, 2019). Additionally, while [ECERS] acknowledges the importance of social interactions, it still places a significant focus on the physical environment, potentially overlooking the depth of children's learning experiences, including their holistic development and well-being (College of the Canyons, 2020).

Leaders and practitioners take on accountability to evaluate their settings identifying area of strengths and opportunities for development ensuring practitioners reflect on their ongoing practice and the environment to continue to provide a high-quality environment (Cottle and Alexander, 2014). This accountability can ensure that practitioners are able to drive quality in their settings by enhancing the learning environment. Children should have access to age-appropriate resources and are exposed to a balance of free play and structured activities (Education Endowment Foundation, 2025). This in turn, will score higher ensuring quality and promoting outcomes for children including holistic development.

Additionally, to encourage social, emotional development and cooperate play, Sylva *et al.* (2006) state that practitioners should provide opportunities for children to interact with each other and adults. Moreover, practitioners will also need to ensure that the environment is safe, and routines are put in place for healthy food choices and personal care to ensure children are encouraged to be independent which develops their well-being. This is supported by Maslow's Hierarchy of needs where children are fulfilled if these needs are met (Care Learning, 2024).

In contrast to [ECERS], the [SSTEWS] scale prioritises the quality of interactions between practitioners and children. The structured framework of SSTEWS assesses practitioners engaging in [SST] and evaluates their practice with a focus on supporting children's cognitive and emotional development, as well as effective

communication, self-regulation and developing strong relationships (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). With fourteen indicators of quality, [SSTEW] helps practitioners develop deeper, more meaningful engagement with children, encouraging problem solving and critical thinking (Howard *et al.*, 2018; Siraj and Asani, 2014). Additionally, [SSTEW] serves as both an assessment and professional development tool, allowing practitioners to bridge the gap between research and practice. By assessing and understanding strengths and areas requiring improvement practitioners can refine their techniques to enhance children's learning (Howard *et al.*, 2018).

An advantage of [SSTEW] is its strong emphasis on process quality, particularly regarding children's experiences, emotions, and higher order thinking. Brodie (no date) states that environments where children are supported contributes to social and emotional development as well as self-regulation and future success, promoting confidence and resilience (Welsh Government, 2023e). Therefore, feeling safe, secure, and valued in their environment can enable children to develop confidence, resilience, and better learning outcomes (Cumming and Wong, 2018). Similarly, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) highlighted the importance of supporting children through high quality interactions and well-being in early childhood to enhance children's learning outcomes and future success. At the heart of this was [SST], where meaningful interactions between children and adults can develop higher order thinking skills. Through this process children are supported to problem solve and engage in critical thinking (Rakesh *et al.*, 2024). The [SSTEW] evaluates the extent to which practitioners facilitate SST and contributes to a high-quality learning environment where children are encouraged to develop their communication, cognitive development, therefore, progressing their learning (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). This is a process quality which focuses on interactional quality of learning and captures children's experiences and emotions within the setting (Howard *et al.*, 2018).

Despite its advantages, [SSTEW] has some limitations. One challenge is that [SST] requires practitioners to have knowledge of each child's individual development to support their needs and to be highly skilled in recognising children's thinking processes and engaging in meaningful interactions (Eadie *et al.*, 2022) This may be

difficult for less experienced staff to use different questioning techniques required (Arnerich, 2023). Practitioners will have to identify teaching and learning strategies needed to support children's progression to score on the rating scale. For success to be achieved practitioners need to recognise when a child is thinking, and this can require perseverance and concentration from the practitioner (Education Policy Institute, 2018). Additionally, the subjective nature of the assessing interactions means that [SSTEWS] scores can vary depending on individual interpretations, across different settings and even countries. This makes it harder to standardise results across different settings and cultural contexts. Furthermore, while [SSTEWS] focuses on social and cognitive development, it may overlook the physical learning environment and independent learning opportunities, which are essential aspects of early childhood education.

Practitioners can drive the quality of their settings but supporting [SST] through interactions with children to develop their emotional well-being. Welsh Government (2023d) highlights children should be encouraged to express their feelings and develop self-regulation by practitioners ensuring the environment is warm, secure, and respectful. According to Bowlby secure attachment theory (1997, cited in NSPCC Learning, 2021), Children will develop further when they feel safe and secure with a trusted adult. Practitioners will need to provide support to extend children's language and communication skills but engaging in conversations using open ended questioning to promote critical thinking, problem solving and exploration (Department for Education, 2022).

Both [ECERS] and [SSTEWS] provide valuable insights into early childhood education settings but serve different purposes. [ECERS] excels in evaluating structural and environmental quality, ensuring that learning spaces, routines, and resources support children's development (Masterson *et al.*, 2019). However, with a focus on the environment, the assessment may not fully capture the depth of children's interactions and engagement. In contrast, [SSTEWS] is effective in assessing process quality, particularly regarding communication, emotional well-being, and problem-solving skills (Education Endowment Foundation, 2024). However, it may neglect the

importance of a well-structured physical environment, which is important for children to feel safe and learn effectively.

Another difference between the two scales is in the level of practitioner expertise required. [ECERS] provides a more standardised and structured approach, making it accessible to a broader range of practitioners. In contrast, [SSTEW] demands a high level of pedagogical understanding, as practitioners must recognise and respond to children's cognitive processes effectively (Education Development Trust, 2025; Purdon 2013).

In conclusion, to improve early childhood education provision and ensure quality, practitioners need to gather comprehensive information from both [ECERS] and [SSTEW]. [ECERS] provides data on structural aspects such as space, materials and routines which can be used to create a well-organised environment with appropriate resources. On the other hand, [SSTEW] highlights the quality of practitioner and child interactions, enhanced with [SST] and emotional support. While both tools offer valuable insights into quality, they also have limitations. [ECERS] does not provide deep insights into pedagogical interactions, while [SSTEW] does not assess the learning environment's physical aspects. Although, they differ in their focus, both are valuable in enhancing early childhood education for practitioners to reflect on and improve their practice ensuring high quality learning environments that support children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. By integrating both tools, practitioners could gain a holistic understanding of quality and address both structural and process related improvements.

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