

Reflective paper

Considering the definition of quality within settings without considering quality assurance and professional development tools that support settings to go above minimum standards, settings have government-based controls that claim to define quality, and which aim to manage and sustain minimum quality standards within settings (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016). For example, settings in Wales which are not maintained are regulated and inspected by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) and they set out standards for quality, management, staffing and the physical environment, which all settings must meet (European Commission, 2018).

Campbell-Barr (2014) states that these requirements aim to maintain quality within settings, which are set out using pre-determined, measurable indicators, such as standards. For example, the National Minimum Standards outlined within the Welsh Government (2016). Social Care Wales (2017) also has a set list of required qualifications that practitioners must have in order to work within early years and childcare settings in Wales. However, Fenech (2011) argues that these indicators do not always support the best quality service. Georgeson et al. (2014) add to this by suggesting that areas such as staffing, for example, are recognised to being central to quality, and that staff should have a certain standard of qualifications to enable this quality of service. However, Georgeson et al. (2014) suggests that consideration needs to be given to practitioners that have a set of skills, alongside these formal qualifications, such as being caring and empathetic.

According to Manghani (2011), ensuring quality throughout settings using quality assurance and professional development tools is important to allow for change and stakeholder satisfaction, thus promoting stakeholder loyalty and repeat use of service. Manghani (2011) adds that these operational results allow for better revenue outcomes and profitability. Miller et al. (2012) state that this can further support settings in ensuring positive development, as they have more money to spend to provide high quality provision. However, Campbell-Bar (2014) argues that policies and standards surround settings, thus creating an entrepreneurial leadership style, whereby leaders provide a professional and business-like service, suggesting that leaders need to consider and understand the balance between providing a caring service for children and managing the setting. Cottle and Alexander (2012) similarly suggest that leaders must balance the need for quality assurance and meeting CIW standards, while responding to the beliefs on how best to work with children.

Education Policy Institute (2018), Lindon and Trodd (2016), Dearing et al. (2009), Ishimine (2009) and Mashburn et al. (2008) state that research projects such as the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) and Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY), support examples of what is defined as a high-quality setting, and highlights that children who attended high-quality settings demonstrate higher social and academic achievement than those who attended lower quality provisions. Ishimine et al. (2010), therefore, suggests that from this research evidence, the measurement of quality is necessary in ensuring that settings promote children's potential to develop and that they have the best start in life. However, Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) state that they require clear policy from government. Education Policy Institute (2018) highlights that, despite this strong idea that high-quality childcare settings allow for sustained and significant improvements on children's development and outcomes, they lack clarity as to what high-quality provisions look like in practice.

Looking at The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) as one example of a professional development tool and observational rating scale, Gordon et al. (2015) states that ECERS is widely used by settings, often to evaluate whether they provide children with sufficient quality to improve aspects, such as creating stimulating environments and ensuring school readiness. Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) state that ECERS are used in a range of ways, including by setting staff, to undertake self-assessments and in preparation for accreditation. Childcare aware (2017) add that ECERS are used to improve setting's quality by identifying training needs, strengths and areas of improvement, and to identify and select materials and resources.

Looking at how ECERS supports professional development, Mathers et al. (2007) and Mathers et al. (2012) state that this monitoring and detailed scale can be used as a baseline in which further progress can be measured and improved amongst the settings environment and staff. Buysse and Hollingsworth (2009) states that ECERS has been designed to improve quality rather than impose on additional standards, allowing settings to recognise their ability to monitor and undertake reflective self-evaluation. Buysse and Hollingsworth (2009) add that ECERS clearly sets out the progression in quality within each area, meaning that it allows settings to see the level which they are at, as well as the next steps.

Hoffer (2010) notes that influences, such as the length of observation period, the time point of the year in which ECERS observations are undertaken and the time that they begin, are entirely

dependent on the observer. Hoffer (2010) adds that there is little research on how these influence the results in scoring. Although, Sylva et al. (2006) and Lindon and Trodd (2016) state that the ECERS developers cannot control how the ECERS is used, therefore, suggest the importance of understanding some of the possible implications. A study by Hoffer (2010) demonstrated the impact that characteristics of observations themselves have on the results of ECERS scoring, particularly when considering the length of observation time, and concluded that the length of time of an observation, had an influence on results and scoring. Setodji et al. (2018) add that when the ECERS is used in making decisions, such as for the funding of programs, issues that might affect scoring must be considered.

Childcare aware (2017) suggests that for practitioners to use the scale properly, they should undertake training to gain knowledge on using this type of rating scale, however this can be costly. Wilcox-Herzogi et al. (2013) add that this can allow for more accurate observations and scoring. Ishimine et al. (2010) state that using development tools such as ECERS can allow settings to address issues for quality improvement. For example, some link to continuous professional development. However, Ishimine et al. (2010) argue that there can be flaws, as settings which self-assess their own provision do not always provide much critical feedback to support improvement and development.

Early et al. (2018) support ECERS as a tool for assessing early years setting's quality, however, state that research suggests that there is a need for further tool development. For example, Early et al. (2018) state that some critique of the quality measuring scale include a lack of consideration to the best methods to measure children's outcomes, how stable the quality of the early years' environment is all year round, and how reliable the data collector is when linking to children's growth and development while observing. However, Burchinal (2017) states that it is critical to continue to ensure quality by providing a safe and stimulating early years environment and experience for young children.

Reed and Canning (2012) add that improving the quality of service is a continuous process, in which aspects of practice are evaluated in order to support and enhance the wellbeing of children and families. Reed and Canning (2012) also state that quality can be defined in a range of ways. For example, the use of children's voices to determine quality. Also, consideration to theoretical pioneers that observed children, such as Vygotsky, Montessori, Rousseau and Piaget, who all had varied conclusions on children's development and how adults can promote learning (Robinson, 2008). Considering ECERS, it is suggested that current methods are

important in ensuring quality, however, should be measured against a wider range of psychometric tools (Forry et al., 2009; Gordon et al., 2013; Zaslaw et al., 2011).

Brunsek et al. (2017) state that ECERS currently only focuses on resources and the environment of settings and does not consider aspects such as listening to the stakeholders and shared interests. Also, evaluating whether the children are working together, problem solving, evaluating activities and ensuring that the setting's practices are child-initiated. Brunsek et al. (2017) add that ECERS appears to capture aspects of quality that impact children's wellbeing, however, this is very little. Although, findings support current efforts to develop new scoring approaches for future ECERS development (Clifford et al., 2012; Harms et al., 2015).

Hu et al. (2015) raise the concern to whether it is fair to use a universal scale to score standards for urban versus rural settings, as well as settings in economical versus settings in remote areas. Research suggests, according to Hu et al. (2015), that rural and remote settings often receive lower scoring to those of economical and urban settings, as they receive less funding. However, Hu et al. (2015) add that the standards of these provisions should not be compromised. Therefore, Hu and Roberts (2013) note that there is a need for the government to invest more on the recruitment of high-quality staff as well as on the physical environment of these provisions.

Hopkin et al. (2010) carried out a study comparing Ofsted grading to ECERS assessments, which found that there was a significant but weak correlation between them. Hopkin et al. (2010) add that the reasons for this included the differences in scope between the two measures. Mathers et al. (2012) similarly suggest that ECERS has different objectives to Ofsted in regard to what they are looking for when assessing quality, however, are broadly in line with each other. Georgeson et al. (2014) argue that assessing quality is more than just Ofsted inspections and the use of rating scales, adding that it is a complex and multifaceted term.

Both the EPPE and REPEY projects concluded that to enable high-quality provision, settings must ensure that adults provide warm, responsive relationships with children (Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, 2014; Neale and Pino-Pasternak, 2016). Marbina et al. (2015) similarly add that these longitudinal studies show that high-quality early years settings with excellent outcomes for children were the settings that enhanced and supported the developmental outcomes of children through Sustained Shared Thinking and high-quality interactions. The REPEY project also outlined the importance of Sustained Shared Thinking as a way of improving quality within provisions (Miller et al., 2012). Therefore, looking at the Sustained Shared Thinking

and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWE) scale as another professional development tool used within provisions, Neale and Pino-Pasternak (2016) state that this tool has the same structure as ECERS, however, builds on it, with more of a focus on pedagogy within the setting, as well as the role of adults in supporting development and learning.

Purdon (2016) explains that Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) is based on the idea of joint activity, which includes exchanging and extending ideas and knowledge. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) adds that the concept of SST resulted from qualitative data of pedagogical interactions within high-quality early years settings. From this data, it was revealed that SST's learning potential was realised and ultimately supported children to verbally express their thoughts and ideas (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Marbina et al. (2015) add that the SSTEWE scale is a tool that has been developed for educational research, to enable provision improvement and allow for practitioner self-evaluation.

National Day Nurseries Association (2019) support the SSTEWE scale and add that they are a worthwhile additional professional development tool which can support staff to pinpoint areas of excellent and less good quality and have been used to develop training to support weaker areas. However, National Day Nurseries Association (2019) adds that the SSTEWE scale should be used alongside other frameworks as its focus is on adult and child interactions. Although, Siraj-Blatchford (2009) highlights that what is important about SSTEWE is that it is evidence based within settings and is a useful concept for pedagogy, unlike ECERS. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) adds that the strongest theoretical influence on this scale has been found to be Vygotsky. However, linking back to what Robinson (2008) stated about the different conclusions of theoretical pioneers that observed children, consideration to whether Vygotsky's theory is best in ensuring high-quality provisions needs to be considered (Neale and Pino-Pasternak, 2016).

Early et al. (2018) state that the role of the observer in using this scale is different to that of ECERS and suggests that the observer should consider how adults support and extend learning, which includes their responsiveness to individual children, small groups or large groups of children, as well as looking at children's interactions with other children. Burgess and Greaves (2013) state that who undertakes these assessments needs to be considered, as having the setting's practitioners to undertake them can lead to conscious or unconscious biases, suggesting that independent observers should undertake the assessments. Marbina et al. (2015) add that this could include the setting leader, rather than practitioners that work closely with the children, as this is said to reduce observer bias which could affect scoring and outcomes.

Marbina et al. (2015) also suggest that this can generate more open discussions about positive aspects, as well as aspects that might need improvement, for example, to how the environment is set up, how stimulating the learning activities are, and how comfortable the children are within their surroundings.

Therefore, Melhuish et al. (2016) claim that the SSTEWS scale influences practice, as adults must ensure that they support learning and critical thinking by creating positive relationships with the children and by providing an enabling environment, thus allowing for learning and development to take place. Melhuish et al. (2016) and Ishimine et al. (2010) both add that the SSTEWS scale influences leadership styles within settings, stating that in order to fully support this type of professional development tool, leaders should take on a pedagogical style of leadership, to promote SST and pedagogical understanding.

Melhuish et al. (2015) note that this scale considers high-quality interactions with and between children, however, state that some settings or staff may find its use difficult as it includes subscales, adding that it needs to be used by practitioners that have knowledge of appropriate practice and child development. Fumoto (2012) similarly suggests that practitioners' efforts to support SST and implementing the SSTEWS scale within practice could be enhanced further through adequate training on its use. Purdon (2016) adds that the government appear to recognise the link between high-quality settings and effective SST, however, do not provide sufficient funding to develop training.

Given the fact that SST focuses on communication, the majority of its research involves interactions with adults and pre-school aged children (Peters and Davies, 2011; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008; Wild, 2011). Purdon (2016) and Department for Education (2018) both consider the fact that Sustained Shared Thinking is largely unexplored in the infant-toddler years, which raises the question as to whether this method of quality assurance is applicable for children of a younger age group. Siraj-Blatchford (2007) and Neale and Pino-Pasternak (2016) acknowledge this difficulty and state that SST with children under the age of two is significantly different from older children. However, suggest that emotional communication with adults is seen as the beginning of this SST process in early infancy (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007; Neale and Pino-Pasternak, 2016).

Department of Education (2018) suggests that there are some influences that are associated with the use of SSTEWS scales within settings, including the fact that some settings have a higher overall staff to child ratio, meaning that children are getting more opportunities for SST

support from staff, thus affecting scoring. Also, having higher qualified staff in some settings than others, meaning that they might have more knowledge and a better understanding of child development, SST and the STEW scale (Department of Education, 2018). Some settings may also have a staff training budget, which is a strong predictor of quality using the STEW scale, meaning that the quality of staff can support child interaction further (Marbina et al., 2015).

La Paro et al. (2012) state that, considering the differences between both ECERS and STEW as scales to support professional development, using these varying definitions or conceptualisations of quality within early years settings, have a range of consequences and implications on research, policy and practice. Department for Education (2015), La Paro et al. (2012) and Sammons et al. (2017) suggest that high-quality early years provision must be measured using more than just one tool alone and state that it should be measured by using tools to observe process quality, such as ECERS and the STEW scale, as well as considering the structural characteristics of settings and caregivers, including aspects such as whether the setting has the correct staff ratios, the number of children within the setting and whether staff within the setting have the appropriate knowledge and training to support young children.

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