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Reflective Paper

ECEY6011

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Quality in early years provision is widely recognised as a complex and multi-dimensional concept. It is often defined as the ongoing support of children's development through positive relationships and enabling environments (**Birth to 5 Matters, 2025**). However, this definition is not fixed. **Rudoe (2020)** argues that quality is multi-dimensional and unique to each child while **Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2015)** and **Howard et al., (2020)** highlight that quality is subjective and therefore makes it difficult to define. Similarly, **Palaiologou (2023)** agrees and also argues that quality has no universal definition and therefore high-quality provisions will look different depending on the settings. This is further supported by **Cottle and Alexander (2012)** who state that the government, researchers and practitioners all have different views on what quality is within early years which can make it difficult to define and measure.

Eadie et al., (2022) suggests that quality can be seen in three different ways; structural, process and system quality. Research explains that process quality is the children's interactions and experiences within the setting which is very important to go above and beyond statutory requirements of quality (**Edwards, 2021**). **Anders and Wieduwilt (2018)** also highlight that high process quality within a setting has positive short term and long-term effects on the child's holistic development. Likewise, **Nutbrown (2012)** further highlights the importance of having high quality provisions as it can positively impact a child's development and increase their chances of being successful later on in life. However as previously stated there is no simple definition of quality, and this presents challenges for practitioners who are trying to provide high quality for children which reinforces the need for strong quality assessment tools.

Policy and research further reinforces the importance of continuous quality improvement. **Reed and Canning (2012)** believe that reflective practice plays a crucial role in providing high quality settings. Similarly **Welsh Government (2023)** suggests that ongoing self-evaluation continuously improves provision. **Quality for All (2025)** also agrees and states that reflection is key to ensuring children get the best experiences and opportunities. Therefore, whilst statutory requirements do ensure settings are of a certain standard it is clear that meeting these alone is not enough, and instead children benefit most when settings adopt additional methods to enhance quality such as SSTEWS and ECERS as they critically analyse the setting on

a deeper level. In addition ongoing professional development for practitioners is essential in supporting quality improvement as training enhances practitioners understanding of child development and reflective practice enabling them to apply assessment tools more effectively and meaningfully within their settings.

Quality assurance methods play a crucial role in supporting early years settings to move beyond minimum standards and strive for continuous improvement. These methods support with identifying strengths and areas for development, encouraging reflective practice and evidence-based decision making. A key benefit is that they provide structured frameworks for reflection which allows practitioners to critically evaluate their practice rather than rely on assumptions. This also promotes consistency and accountability by making sure that quality is regularly reviewed and improved. However it is important to recognise that quality cannot be fully achieved by any single method and using a combination of tools is often necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding.

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) Scale is a method used to improve quality, particularly focusing on building positive relationships and supporting children's social and emotional development (**Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish, 2015**). SSTEWS is a child centred method of assessing quality and can be used to identify and critique areas that may need to be improved (**Oppermann et al., 2023**). This suggests that this quality assessment tool does not follow the same structure as other rating scales as it focuses on what experiences the child has had, however it is important to note that practitioners should not use it like a checklist as it then becomes inaccurate and is not a genuine reflection of the quality within the setting. SSTEWS was developed to assess adult child interactions as previous assessment tools focused more on factors such as the practicality of the environment (**Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish, 2023**).

Research suggests that SSTEWS can be a reliable method for assessing quality. **Howard et al., (2020)** found the SSTEWS Scale to be consistent and effective in identifying strengths and areas for improvement. Therefore anyone within the setting can use it due to it focusing on the children's experiences and development allowing practitioners to identify strengths and areas for improvement. However, consistent use of this method does not always mean it is an accurate one as, **Siraj et al.,**

(2019) highlights the SSTEW scale may not always be credible as it is highly variable and therefore may not correlate with national standards or regulations. On the other hand, **Kazmierska-Kowalewska *et al.*, (2021)** found that the SSTEW scale was able to be used alongside other assessment scales as it showed a high correlation indicating that SSTEW is a reliable tool. **Hoare (no date)** suggests that the SSTEW scale is beneficial to children's language and critical thinking skills as child and adult interactions often lead to deeper thinking and understanding. They also found that the SSTEW scale was beneficial for practitioners as they could clearly reflect on their interactions with children. Similarly, **Waters and MacDonald (2020)** found SSTEW to have a positive effect on practice as it allowed practitioners to identify areas for improvement which they were then able to use to strengthen the settings provision. **Papic and Papic (2025)** found that whilst practitioners believe and are confident that they will deliver a high-quality provision this may not align with the SSTEW Scale, and they may score poorly highlighting the need for quality assessment tools such as SSTEW.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is another assessment tool widely used to measure quality. It focuses on key areas space, furnishing, numeracy and language, etc (**Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2010**). This indicates that ECERS is focused more on structural areas of quality, which is beneficial in identifying areas for improvement of the physical environment, however the child's interaction and learning experiences might get missed. The scoresheet is a useful tool as it supports reflective practice, and practitioners can use the results to enhance the quality of the setting (**Harms, Clifford and Cryer, no date**). ECERS is used across many different countries to measure quality, however research indicates that ECERS alone is not able to assess all areas of quality therefore it should be used with other quality assessment tools to achieve a clearer picture (**Alpys and Hernández-Torrano, 2026**). **Rudoe (2020)** emphasises this further and suggests that ECERS is highly focused on structural quality and may miss children's individual aspects of development that contribute to a high-quality setting. **Wengman and Forssman (2026)** also argue that some areas of ECERS are weak and do not reflect the meaning of high quality within early years. Similarly, **Gordon *et al.*, (2012)** Brunsek *et al.*, (2017) studies indicate that the ECERS scale lacks validity and does not reflect children's developmental outcomes suggesting that ECERS alone does

not accurately reflect what high quality provision is, further emphasising the need to use other forms of measuring quality alongside. The ECERS quality assessment tool measures areas of literacy, mathematics and science, etc, which could limit focus on other areas of quality meaning it may lack relevance for some national standards or regulations (**Siraj et al, 2019**). ECERS is widely used across many countries and different practitioners use them, but their results vary and heavily rely on how they define quality indicating that the rating scale alone may not accurately reflect what high quality is therefore it is important to use other quality methods alongside **La Paro et al., (2012)**.

The comparison between SSTEW and ECERS highlights the complexity of assessing quality. While ECERS focuses on the quality of the environment, the SSTEW emphasises the children's learning and experiences which suggests that quality can be interpreted in many different ways (**Palaologou, 2023**). Therefore, it is important to consider that both assessment tools used together could be much more effective in measuring quality compared to on their own. ECERS measures quality in a more structural way, contradictory to this it is argued that high quality interactions between children and adults have a higher impact on child development compared to the structure of an environment suggesting that SSTEW might be a more useful assessment tool than ECERS (**Anders and Wieduwilt, 2018**). **Kruty et al., (2021)** agrees that they both assess different aspects of quality and can both be useful, however they found that the SSTEW scale was able to be introduced much quicker compared to ECERS, indicating SSTEW might be an easier assessment tool to use.

Effective leadership is also critical in ensuring the successful use of quality assessment tools. **Siraj and Hallet (2014)** highlight that high quality provision relies heavily on effective and caring leadership therefore using assessment tools such as SSTEW and ECERS needs a strong leader who is highly knowledgeable of these tools so that these methods can be used effectively and continuously. **Waters and MacDonald (2020)** research highlighted that whilst using quality assessment tools can be beneficial practice can sometimes become performative as they can interpret these tools as being a checklist which could mean there is no genuine change or improvement suggesting that assessment tools are not always the best way to measure quality. Additionally, leadership plays a key role in creating a culture of

continuous improvement where staff feel supported and encouraged to reflect honestly on their practice without fear of judgement. This culture is essential in ensuring that quality assurance methods lead to meaningful change rather than superficial compliance. Overall, from the research for quality assurance methods to be effective it is highly reliant on the knowledge and interpretation of the practitioners themselves and how they implement them into practice. Nevertheless **Huang (2024) and La Paro *et al.*, (2012)** found that there was a positive correlation between ECERS and SSTEWS and that results were similar indicating that using multiple assessment tools is best practice to ensure settings are consistently delivering a high-quality provision.

Quality assurance tools have been shown to be useful in assessing quality within settings however they do come with their limitations. It is important to note that these tools may miss things as every setting is different so using the same tool across every setting will vary and they may not provide a complete understanding. It is also important to recognise that every child is different and has individual needs so these tools may not be suitable for every child's circumstances. Brunsek *et al.*, (2017) further emphasises this and states that there are weaknesses between scores and child outcomes. Another limitation is practitioners may unintentionally use a performative approach when using these tools meaning they may focus on the score chart rather than genuinely improving quality (**Waters and MacDonald, 2020**). These limitations reinforce that quality assessment tools should not be entirely relied on and they should just be used for guidance of improving quality.

In conclusion high quality provision within early years cannot be achieved by following statutory requirements alone. The use of quality assurance methods such as SSTEWS and ECERS support delivering high quality provision but from the research it is clear that the use of one single method does not fit all aspects of quality and does not show the whole picture, therefore it is important that multiple methods are used alongside each other to gain a clear insight and a deeper understanding of high quality. The research also highlights that high quality provision is dependent on the practitioner's knowledge, understanding and how they interpret the information or results and what they do with them to improve and shape practice.

Ultimately high-quality provision is not determined primarily by scores or compliance but by meaningful experiences and outcomes of children. Continuous reflection, critical use of assessment tools and a commitment to improvement are key to ensuring that children get the best possible start in life.

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