

Leadership and Management for Systems of Quality

Quality

Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) and Sabol *et al.* (2013, cited in Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017) and Palaiologu's (2023) study identifies the complexity of quality in the early years, and it cannot be universally defined. However, Williams (2016) and Torri *et al.* (2017) state quality is achieved from maintaining standards and accountability, from setting policies, procedures, systems and practices. Eadie *et al.* (2022) and Early *et al.* (2018) agree, identifying alongside systems, structural and process, which highlight the importance of the environment, and the learning experiences offered for children through teaching, and the curriculum.

Furthermore, Palaiologou (2023) and Slot (2018) identify structural quality as environmental, highlighting the importance of leadership and management of factors such as, staff qualifications, ratios, and indicating smaller group sizes linking to process quality. Edwards (2021) emphasises the importance of process and the positive impact of quality experiences and children's interactions has on learning and on their development. However, Palaiologou (2023) states there is more to quality than just structure and process, mentioning how quality is embedded within the community, with natural factors such as economic, ethnic, cultural and spiritual aspects. Therefore, linking to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977) creating relationships between home, setting and community are paramount. Moss (2016) adds how quality is a choice and not a necessity and states the process of defining quality to stakeholders who have different views such as parents, children and practitioners. Additionally, the Welsh Government (2023a) highlights quality is gained from actively seeking feedback from stakeholders, such as parents, children and professionals.

UNICEF (2015) stresses quality is achieved through well-defined standards, effective monitoring and collaboration amongst stakeholders. Quality assurance systems are highlighted as essential tools for ensuring safe, inclusive and developmentally appropriate early years environments. By collating data these systems promote continuous improvement, inform policy decisions and enhance accountability to families and communities. In Wales, to ensure minimum standards, quality and safety, the Care Inspectorate Wales (hereafter CIW) inspects and registers childcare and play provision (Welsh Government, 2023c). CIW (2018) is a government organisation that ensures compliance with minimum standards, provides assurance about the standards, accessibility and safety of provision, offering requirements and recommendations to improve care, promoting improvements through policies and standards. The National Minimum Standards, standard 18 requirements for ensuring children receive quality care, focusing on monitoring, improvements and promoting and reflecting practice and should be applied throughout all areas of the provision (Welsh Government, 2023c).

Additionally, for settings that provide funded nursery education the Education and Training Inspectorate for Wales (hereafter Estyn) emphasises joint inspections with CIW to evaluate the quality of care and education for children up to 12 years old, particularly focusing on three to four years old receiving funded nursery education in a non-maintained setting. With the focus on safety, learning and development, the environment, quality, promoting improvements and informing national policy and providing transparency between all stakeholders, such as parents and the community (Estyn, 2024).

Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) state the importance of the inspection process with it being highly regarded as guiding quality against a nationally agreed criterion. However, Palaialogu (2023) challenges universal standards by proposing that quality should go beyond the practical day-to-day aspects and should focus on what is best for the individual provision, taking into consideration the children, staff, families and community. Conversely, Georgeson *et al.*'s (2014, cited in Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016)

research highlighted that quality is more than just a rating scale, inspection and it was a complex and multifaceted term. Additionally, Evans (2025) highlights how inspections can have psychological impact on practitioners including emotional distress, even contributing some practitioners contemplating leaving the profession.

Supporting Quality

Aubrey (2016) emphasises the significance of quality incentives in early years, highlighting the role of leadership in driving enhancements. She highlights the value of fostering a culture focusing on continuous professional development, reflective practice and teamwork among staff to achieve these improvements. Furthermore, Children who attend settings of higher quality, can demonstrate and develop better cognitive, social and emotional skills (Brunsek *et al.*, 2017)). Moreover, Vermeer *et al.* (2016) states environment rating scales were developed to measure childcare environments including interactions, materials and learning opportunities.

The Welsh Government (2023a and 2023c) identifies the importance of enabling adults and using observational tools to reflect and inform planning to ensure engaging experiences and providing an effective environment. In addition to enabling adults, sharing a common goal of improving quality and empowering practitioners. Aubrey (2016) highlights the ongoing necessity of staff training to ensure best practice and adapt to evolving policies, also continuous professional development for staff is essential for enhancing staff's quality and in turn improving outcomes and quality of the setting.

Additionally, Welsh Government (2023a) emphasises the rights-based and child-centred approach that places wellbeing and development at the heart of early years education and care, creating a Quality Framework in addition to the National Minimum Standards and Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings. Early years settings that

provide high-quality provisions support holistic development, skills and lifelong learning (Welsh Government, 2023c).

In the Welsh Government (2023c) National Minimum Standards, Section 18.4 it states provisions should embrace an ongoing cycle of improvements to contribute to fostering a culture of quality, this process they suggest using observational tools, to measure and improve the quality of care and outcomes.

The Effective Provision of the Pre-School Education (EPPE 1997-2003) Project, a large-scale European study in the early years, demonstrated the impact high quality settings have on children's development, using the environmental observational tool, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (hereafter ECERS) (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2006; Sylva, *et al.* 2004). Additionally, Cottle and Alexander (no date) states that settings use rating scales such as ECERS to measure process and structure quality. Furthermore, Howard *et al.*'s (2018) study compares Shared Sustained Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (hereafter SSTEWS) with ECERS and highlights how the two observational scales complement each other. ECERS focuses on curricular quality and SSTEWS captures the intricate aspects of interaction, quality supporting communication, emotional support and shared activities.

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)

ECERS is designed to assess and improve the quality of early childhood environments from the perspective of children, emphasising their development, needs and safety (Clifford, *et al.*, 2019). ECERS was developed in 1980's and is a global measure of quality, to measure both structure and process of the environment, made up of multiple dimensions on a 7-point scale, such as space and furniture, routines, language-reasoning, experiences, interactions, and structure, also offering a holistic view of the learning environment (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014; Brunsek *et al.*, 2017). Brunsek *et*

al. (2017) adds ECERS influences the immediate learning environment, curriculum, child and practitioner interactions and learning. Furthermore, ECERS is heavily backed by research and is widely validated, being linked to child outcomes, in particular positive language and social-emotional development (Gordon *et al.*, 2012).

However, Brunsek *et al.* (2017) highlights ECERS has a heavy focus on physical and observable aspects, such as materials and room arrangements, stating it overlooks learning outcomes. Setodji, Schaack and Le (2019) agree, identifying how ECERS can unintentionally narrow practitioners focus, limiting holistic learning experiences, to meet specific criteria. Additionally, the tool may not take inconsideration the diverse cultural and contextual factors that influence quality in the early years, making it less adaptable to varied environments. Additionally, scores vary, and inconsistencies appear, between environment level quality assessments and child-level outcomes raising questions about its utility in distinguishing high-quality settings (Brunsek *et al.*, 2017; Gordon *et al.*, 2012).

ECERS according to French (2011, cited in Campbell and Leeson, 2016) does not cover all aspects and neither do formal CSW inspections. However, the new addition ECERS-3 (2014) claim to have improved the emphasis on child development. On the other hand, Setodji, Shaack and Le (2019) and Gordon *et al.* (2012) suggest how ECERS should be used alongside other tools to measure and provide a more comprehensive understanding of quality and remove limitations. Additionally, Brunsek *et al.* (2017) suggests using an additional tool to provide a broader range, focusing on social and emotional outcomes. Furthermore, Kingston and Siraj (2015) identifies ECERS and SSTEW work well together.

Shared Sustained Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWS)

SSTEWS is an observational rating scale designed to measure the quality of interactions within the early years' settings, with the emphasis on how practitioners support children's thinking, emotional wellbeing and social development through shared sustained thinking and meaningful engagement (Sylva, 2015). Additionally, Siraji, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) states SSTEWS is used for research, self-evaluation and for improvement, comparing the format like ECERS.

The article by Siraji, Kingston and Melhuish (2023) highlights how SSTEWS enhances the quality process by stressing the importance of engaging with children in sustained shared thinking, problem solving and reasoning which are areas that can develop social-emotional development, self-regulation and cognitive growth. Additionally, they add how the scale has clear indicators of assessing and improving practice aligning with evidence-based methodologies to enhance quality. Furthermore, Howard *et al.* (2018) states from their study SSTEWS highlights the importance of quality interactions as it fosters children's cognitive and emotional growth, stating SSTEWS is a reliable tool for professional development and quality improvement.

However, Howard *et al.* (2018) states the role of the SSTEWS scale in practice can contribute to shaping better practices and improving quality measures however, stating SSTEWS requires further investigation to fully explore how the scale could be used to improve practices within the early years.

Implementation

Both ECERS and SSTEW are a part of the Curriculum, Leadership and Interaction Quality Rating Scales, providing bespoke training for reliability (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). Neitzel *et al.* (2019) state training to effectively use ECERS ensures consistency and reliability in developing understanding of the scale, structure and application, highlighting the importance to ensure improving quality. Similarly, Siraji *et al.* (2023) highlights the importance of training to ensure practitioners are familiar and understand how to effectively use the SSTEW scale to promote consistency to measure and improve the process of quality. Howard *et al.* (2018) identifies assessors of SSTEW are to be conducted by practitioners who have received comprehensive training, including a day of extensive in-field practice with feedback. Additionally, two fieldworkers visit the setting to complete the assessments. However, this could limit its accessibility in some settings due to limited budgets (Melhuish and Gardiner (2018). Additionally, SSTEW training takes 5 days to complete.

ECERS have more editions, for different ages ECERS-R for 2 ½ to 5 years old, where ECERS-3 is for age range 3 – 5 with different therefore creating additional costs (Environment Rating Scales Institute, 2025). ECERS-3 is conducted over a 3-hour observation period with many items. Melhuish and Gardiner (2018) suggest the possibility of developing a scale that outperform the ECERS and STEW scales suggesting more streamlined scales, with less items to assess would be more time-efficient and lead to significant cost saving. However, they take into consideration let items and shorter assessments would lessen the impact on children.

Conclusion

Leadership has an influence over quality, by managing process and structural factors, such as environmental, staff qualifications, ratios, experiences (Palaiologou, 2023; Slot, 2018). Williams (2017) states taking accountability and maintaining standards in line with policies and procedures, such as National Minimum Standards. Additionally, quality can be achieved through feedback from stakeholders (Welsh Government, 2023a)

Welsh Government (2023a, 2023c) highlights enabling adults and using observational tools. Howard *et al.* (2018) identified using both ECERS and SSTEWS together to get a more detailed and holistic result. ECERS and SSTEWS both require training to ensure consistent and reliable feedback (Neitzel *et al.*, 2019; Siraji *et al.*, 2023). However, Melhuish and Gardner (2018) identify for some settings this could limit accessibility due to funds.

Vermeer *et al.* (2016) highlights the importance of rating scales both process and structural quality to improve childcare settings and supports improvements. Similarly, Aubrey (2016) and Howard *et al.* (2018) agree, highlighting how rating scales can support professional development therefore improving quality and experiences to children. With Howard *et al.* (2018) emphasising that ECERS focus on structural quality such as physical environment and routines and SSTEWS's focus on process quality, with interactions between practitioners and the children. Additionally, ECERS ensures minimum standards are met, whereas SSTEWS is linked to developmental outcomes, supporting professional development.

High quality early years settings provide children with better outcomes, emotional wellbeing and socio-emotional skills and enable children's effective holistic development (Eadie *et al.* 2022; Welsh Government, 2023c)

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