

The first five years of a child's life are seen to be the most important in relation to future success (Waller et al, 2011). The understanding that if the environment is right, a young child is given more opportunity to learn, is increasingly being recognised. Although the ideas about imprinting and critical periods have been criticised, there is still a widely recognised understanding that it is far easier to learn certain skills, particularly language, in the early years, this is down to the plasticity level of the brain within these first few years of life (May and Nurse, 2007). This is why quality pedagogy and practice are fundamental in the early years and for this to be the case, the early years workforce need to link their practice with child development theory and have the understanding that underpinning good practice is the ability to reflect on theory (Miller, 2012). Early Years (2019) therefore suggest using a quality assurance measuring tool in order to guide and support settings to improve provision and practices that will result in an improved outcome for children. Walsh and Gardner (2005) agree and add that there are nine key themes which are identified as significant indicators of quality early years provision including children's level of motivation and independence in a setting. It is of importance that early years practitioners measure the levels of such indicators in order to be able to reflect on whether the environment for learning generated and the practices in their settings are going above the minimum standards that are required with the end result in mind being to improve outcomes for children.

With this in mind, this essay intends to critically analyse two types of quality assurance measuring tools. Namely, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEW) scale.

Sylva et al. (2012) tell us that the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is a tool that is acknowledged to be advantageous, strong and imaginative which can be used for research, self-audit and inspection and has been found appropriate to a variety of settings including statutory, private and voluntary. It has successfully been used to improve practice through self-analysis and has been a key asset to early childhood research. However, Howard et al. (2018) tell us that the notion of quality is a widely contested term which holds different meaning with each individual depending on individual values. In terms of wanting to understand how to improve quality in early years provision, the study conducted by Howard et al. (2018) suggests that interactional quality is the main indicator for overall quality in terms of its effects on children's development. This would suggest that using the SSTEW scale to self-audit and reflect upon a setting's practices would be

more beneficial to improving quality and therefore children's outcomes. This is because the SSTEWS scale measures sustained shared thinking which is adult-child interaction whereas the ECERS is more concerned with measuring the quality of educational curricula and is more predictive of children's academic outcomes (Cryer et al, 1999). Sammons et al. (2017) continue on this point by identifying different types of quality. They tell us that structural quality refers to things such as class size, adult to child ratios, teacher qualification levels and the size of the setting. Comparatively, process quality refers to the quality of the interactions between adults and children and the interactions that children have with the space and provided materials. Additionally, Sammons et al. (2017) state that it is process quality which has a direct effect on children's development whereas structural quality has an indirect effect and only through its influences on process quality. This would suggest that Howards et al's. (2018) study findings, that interactional or process quality is the main indicator of overall quality, is correct and therefore means that when wanting to measure the level of quality in your setting, the SSTEWS scale would be of more benefit as it measures interactional or process quality. This is compared with the ECERS which is more in line with measuring what Sammon et al. (2017) describe as structural quality, which does not affect children's development directly. In direct contrast to this however, Sylva et al. (2006) state that their study has demonstrated that the ECERS is a reliable rating scale for evaluating the educational aspects of process quality in a setting and is a reliable and substantial indicator of children's cognitive and linguistic development.

However, Cottle and Alexander (2012) continue the critique of the ECERS by adding that when measuring quality, measuring scales and tools need to take into account that the understanding of quality is 'multidimensional and value laden'. When asked, practitioner's responses were all consistent with a feeling of pressure to meet the requirements of the curriculum and governing bodies in terms of children's academic achievement being reached by a certain age. This resulted in a mutual feeling shared by all practitioners asked, that these pressures actually restricted the quality of their own practice. This would suggest that these pressures are heightened by the ECERS which as Howard et al. (2018) Previously stated, is more concerned with measuring academic achievement. In answer to this, Reed and Canning (2010) tell us that although it is important to utilise good quality tools such as the ECERS to help us recognize ways in which practice needs to change or evolve, it is the way such tools are used that is essential to achieving beneficial results.

There must be a critical stance adopted when utilising any quality measuring tool in order to extract the information from them that would be of benefit to practice.

However, in response to Cottle and Alexanders (2012) findings that practitioners felt burdened with pressures from statutory requirements, Leana et al. (2009) point out that it is the governing bodies that apply the requirements that are funding early years settings and a high quality setting needs public funding. This in turn will bring regulations on educational requirements for teachers, ratios and class sizes but contrasting the opinions of the practitioners in Cottle and Alexanders (2012) study however, Leana et al. (2009) state that these requirements are generally thought to enhance quality of care in a setting. Speib (2013) agrees with Leana et al's. (2009) statement that a high quality setting requires financial backing by telling us that investments in education are important as it is known that high quality education in the early years will result in beneficial developmental and educational outcomes in the future which in turn results in a future society who have achieved high academic attainment resulting in more people working higher paid jobs. This results in a society who are less reliant on government help. The investment into education now, will pay off in the future. However, Speib (2013) points out some concerning statistics on investment into day care settings for children under 3 in various countries in the European union. The UK is one of the lowest on the list in terms of how much has been invested into early education. This would suggest that in the UK, high quality education and care, that is known to be important to children in the first few years, is not necessarily happening due to funding issues.

Siraj et al. (2015) suggest that the SSTEWS scale is designed to consider practice that supports children's development of sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing as well as strong and positive relationships, self-regulation and effective communication. Hammer et al. (2018) tell us that their research has shown that development in these social and emotional areas is consistent with positive later outcomes academically as well as areas such as social and emotional wellbeing. This shows that if children are given the opportunity and support for these areas to be positively developed, then this is a true indicator of quality in a setting. As the SSTEWS scale measures the levels of the previously mentioned areas, then this would suggest that the SSTEWS scale is the most accurate scale to use when measuring the level of quality in a setting. However, Melhuish et al. (2016) point out that a lot of research has shown that the quality of the physical resources and environment in an early years setting, play an important role in children's development and

therefore the overall quality of the setting. This is where the SSTEWS scale seems lacking as it does not include the physical environment in its measurements. This is why Siraj et al (2015) advise us that the SSTEWS scale is not designed to give a complete picture of how high the quality is in a setting as this complete picture would need all aspects of quality to be measured including structural. Therefore Siraj et al. (2015) suggest that although there seems to be a mutual understanding among researchers that the SSTEWS scale is more indicative of quality as it measures process rather than structural quality, the SSTEWS should be used alongside an environment rating scale such as the ECERS in order to get a full picture of what high quality education and care look like.

Lindon and Trodd (2016) however, dispute the previous statement that by using the ECERS and the SSTEWS scale, a complete understanding of the level of quality in a setting will be given as they identify barriers to achieving this full and complete picture of quality when using quality measurement scales. For example, Lindon and Trodd (2016) tell us that the ECERS is a challenging scale to use which requires a highly trained individual to be able to use it effectively. This is because the ECERS only provides brief descriptions which are set against a numerical score so it is the challenge of the individual scoring to decipher which score fits best. This is not only difficult to decipher, but leaves the score open to individual values and opinion. This is similar to the SSTEWS scale as Melhuish (2016) tells us that in order to measure sustained shared thinking, the individual would need to be highly skilled in assessing a child's socio-emotional, linguistic and cognitive development. They would need to be able to have the time to think deeply about what they have witnessed between an adult and child in order to measure the quality of the sustained shared thinking. They would also need the knowledge and understanding required to be able to assess if the child is comfortable, interested and stimulated by the experience in order to assess the sustained shared thinking fully. This shows that there are barriers to being able to complete a SSTEWS scale on a setting as it would take a skilled, educated, knowledgeable individual to be able to complete it, again, leaving room for personal opinion and values to become involved in the assessment.

Melhuish et al. (2015) add that some settings and staff will not be ready for some of the SSTEWS scale sub sections. Particularly critical thinking, extending language and communication, assessment for learning and supporting. This adds to the argument that suggests that the SSTEWS

scale comes with many barriers and this could take away from the primary goal which is rating the level of quality in a setting in order to support quality improvement. Additionally, Ho et al. (2010) agree with the previous points that there are many barriers that come with the SSTEW scale and continue this point by stating that process quality is difficult to make judgements on as it depends on the cultural context as well as individual interpretation. This has led to a tendency in the early years to rely more upon structural rating scales such as the ECERS with the assumption that where structural quality exists, process quality will follow.

Sakai et al. (2003) however, add to the argument that quality measuring scales can not give a complete picture of quality in a setting by adding that the ECERS does not address important factors such as staff stability and culturally sensitive practice such as communicating with families whose first language is not English. In fact, the revised ECERS, (ECERS-R), which has new items added including a section on staff, still does not include staff education and achievement. Siraj et al. (2018) indicate that one of the most important structural measures when determining quality in an early years setting, is the staffs education and achievements. This is because there are clear links between the level of education that staff have attained and the amount and quality of personal development (PD) that staff have attended, with the overall quality of an early years setting. This again suggests that a full and complete picture of how high quality is in a setting, is not attainable if the ECERS is the quality rating scale chosen to determine this picture. Early et al. (2018) point out further concern with the ECERS in that the term quality seems too often to be used interchangeably within the ECERS score system to correspond conveniently with what the ECERS is measuring. This poses a problem in the early years as if the measures of quality do not correspond neatly with the expected outcomes for children, meaning that if a quality measuring tool used widely in the field of early education is indicating that quality is high in a setting but the children's outcomes do not match this, then there is a danger that this will lead to the assumption that quality does not affect children's early education, rather than the quality measuring tool needs serious adjustments. This may then result in less funding being put into the early years. Gordan et al. (2013) agrees with this and adds additional evidence from their study that the low associations between the quality of early years settings and children's developmental outcomes which has been so often stated in the literature on the subject, may suggest that it is the quality measuring tools themselves and their weak psychometric properties that are to blame for this outcome rather than

that quality plays a small or no part at all in early education in terms of children's later developmental and academic outcomes.

To conclude, this paper has looked at the STEW scale and the ECERS. It has argued that quality measuring scales should be used to ensure that a setting is going above minimum standards. However, the overriding understandings that have been gained through the research undertaken for this paper are, that as the notion of quality is widely contested and holds individual meaning depending on personal values, there must be an understanding when using a quality measuring tool that the tool may only be measuring one type of quality and that another may need to be used in conjunction to get a fuller picture of overall quality. Additionally, the picture of quality that comes from using a quality measuring tool may be useful for self-audit and reflection on practices in a setting, but again, there must be an understanding that these quality measuring tools can not take into account every single aspect that may need to be measured in a setting in order to get a complete picture of the level of quality in a setting. Also, an understanding is needed when using one of these tools that its results are not necessarily going to give a truthful picture of quality as the rating scales used in these tools may not correspond perfectly with what actual quality is. As was previously stated, that is because quality will hold different meaning to each individual. Although it is important to ensure that the quality of a setting is above the requirements of the minimum standards and a quality measuring tool is a useful aid to help determine the level for understanding of how to improve quality in a setting, there must be certain understandings when using these tools in order to not rely fully on their results but to just use them as indicators to reflect upon.

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