

Leadership and Management for systems of quality

Quality in early childhood education includes children's learning experiences, well-being, development, and the efficacy of leadership and administration. While inspection procedures overseen by Care Inspectorate Wales (2024) and frameworks such as the National Minimum Standards provide a baseline for acceptable behaviour, they do not guarantee high-quality care, according to the Welsh Government (GOV.WALES, 2023). Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2001) suggest that quality should be regarded as a dynamic, reflective process impacted by connections, context, and practitioners' responsiveness to individual requirements.

Research emphasizes the need of high-quality early childhood care. Early childhood is a vital era for cognitive, social, and emotional development, and children who receive high-quality care have better long-term outcomes (Sylva et al., 2010), highlighting its importance beyond regulatory compliance (Heckman, 2006).

As a result, many early children facilities use quality assurance systems that go beyond regulatory obligations to examine and improve practice (Pascal and Bertram, 2009). This paper critically investigates two such tools: the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms, Clifford, and Cyrer, 2015) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale (SSTEW) (Siraj, Kingston, and Melhuish, 2023). It investigates their strengths, limitations, and the data they generate, while also exploring whether quality assurance systems capture what is important in children's lived experiences or risk prioritizing responsibility (Ball, 2015).

Understanding quality in early years provision

Quality in early childhood settings is defined as two interconnected dimensions: structural quality and process quality, a distinction identified by Siraj-Blatchford (2002). Structural quality includes measurable characteristics such as staff qualifications, adult-child ratios, and the physical environment, whereas process quality focuses on interactions, relationships, and children's lived experiences.

Although both dimensions are crucial, research repeatedly shows that process quality has a more direct and meaningful influence on children's developmental outcomes (Sylva *et al.*, 2004). This is especially pertinent in Wales, where frameworks like the Curriculum for Wales promote holistic development and child-centered, responsive pedagogy (Welsh Government, 2024). However, regulatory frameworks alone cannot capture all of the nuances of practice (Urban *et al.*, 2012). As a

result, more quality assurance approaches are required to provide a better understanding of both environmental provision and the quality of interactions that influence children's daily experiences.

This distinction emphasises that quality cannot be reduced to quantitative metrics alone, an argument strongly associated with Tassoni, Burnham and King (2023). Instead, it must consider the extent of children's participation, emotional security, and learning experiences. As a result, any evaluation of quality assurance systems must evaluate not only what they measure, but also how well they represent and improve children's lived experiences. This also implies that definitions of quality are socially created and may vary based on policy priorities, practitioner beliefs, and cultural expectations, complicating how quality is measured and judged, as discussed by Moss (2016).

Method 1 – ECERS

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is a popular quality assurance measure that evaluates early childhood environments in a variety of areas, including space and furnishings, personal care routines, activities, and relationships (Harms *et al.*, 2015). It offers a grading system, allowing settings to benchmark performance and discover areas for improvement.

One of ECERS' primary strengths is its ability to create unambiguous, quantifiable statistics. This helps leadership teams identify strengths and shortcomings in the physical environment and is strongly aligned with inspection frameworks, particularly the CIW quality area of environment. Its systematic and standardised approach encourages uniformity, accountability, and openness, making it especially useful for inspection preparation and demonstrating compliance (Brunsek *et al.*, 2017).

However, ECERS has been critiqued for supporting a checklist-driven approach in which practitioners concentrate completing certain criteria over reflecting on the quality of children's experiences as discussed by Gordon *et al.*, (2013). This parallels broader worries about a "audit culture" in early childhood education, in which conformity trumps meaningful instructional practice (Ainur Alpys and Hernandez-Torrano, 2025)). As a result, there is a risk that improvements will be cosmetic, with an emphasis on quantitative changes rather than true enhancements to children's learning and development. This raises concerns about performative practice, in which settings appear to achieve quality metrics while not necessarily improving the breadth of children's learning opportunities.

Although ECERS takes into account interactions, its primary focus is on structural features. As a result, it may not accurately reflect the complexities of children's emotional experiences or the quality of adult-child interactions (Children's Emotions and their Impact on Adult life, no date). While it

accurately identifies the resources and conditions existing in a context, it offers little insight into how these are employed to foster meaningful learning (Neitzel *et al.*, 2019).

In reality, ECERS can be a good starting point for assessing provision. For example, it may indicate resource deficiencies or constraints in the environment, resulting in targeted improvements (Sylva *et al.*, 2006). However, without critical thought, such changes may remain at the surface level. This shows that ECERS works best when combined with other approaches that delve deeper into the quality of relationships and children's experiences. As a result, its effectiveness is determined by how critically practitioners engage with the tool rather than the scores it generates on its own (ChildcareCanada.org, 2024).

Method 2 – SSTEW

In contrast, the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale (SSTEW) places a strong emphasis on process quality, namely the nature of adult-child interactions and the emotional climate of the setting. It evaluates factors strongly related to children's developmental outcomes, such as language development, emotional support, and persistent shared thinking, as highlighted by Iram Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015).

One of SSTEW's primary characteristics is its emphasis on high-quality interactions, which research has identified as essential for effective early childhood practice (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Sylva *et al.*, 2010). By emphasising how practitioners interact with children, the tool promotes a better understanding of the learning process and the development of responsive, reflective pedagogy. Positive interactions have a direct impact on children's confidence, engagement, and emotional wellness, and are strongly aligned with the CIW quality areas of care, development, and wellbeing as supported by research from the OECD (2018).

SSTEW encourages professional dialogue and continual progress. Its emphasis on reflection enables practitioners to critically analyse their activity, fostering a culture of continuous improvement rather than simply complying (Hoare, no date). This frames SSTEW as being more aligned with pedagogical quality than regulatory compliance, implying that it may be more effective in facilitating real practice improvements.

However, SSTEW has limitations. Its efficient application necessitates a high level of practitioner knowledge and training, which may limit accessibility in certain situations, as noted by Mathers and

Smee (2014). Furthermore, its qualitative nature includes some subjectivity, making it more difficult to assure consistency in scoring. Unlike ECERS, which offers unambiguous numerical data, SSTEWS is based on professional judgement, which means that results may differ depending on the observer's expertise and interpretation (McNab *et al.*, 2020).

In practice, SSTEWS can be extremely effective at identifying areas for improvement in encounters. For example, it may identify lost chances for prolonged collaborative thought, resulting in targeted professional development. However, its impact is heavily reliant on practitioners' capacity to engage meaningfully in the reflective process, which was emphasised by Hobbs and Mutebi (2021). Without enough training and assistance, its ability to improve quality may be limited. This raises the possibility of inconsistency, as the settings that require the most improvement may be the least capable of efficiently implementing the tool.

Compare and contrast

ECERS and SSTEWS represent two unique but complimentary techniques to quality assurance. ECERS is primarily concerned with structural quality, giving measurable data on the physical environment and organisational aspects of provision. In contrast, SSTEWS focuses on process quality, investigating the interactions and linkages that support children's learning experiences (Edwards, 2021).

This divide mirrors larger disputes in early childhood education about the nature of quality as discussed by Moss (2016). While structural variables are necessary for creating secure and well-resourced environments, they do not always result in favourable results for children. In contrast, high-quality interactions can considerably improve learning and development, especially in low-resource contexts, as evidenced by Anders *et al.* (2012).

However, neither tool delivers a complete picture when used alone. ECERS may underestimate the depth and complexity of interactions, whereas SSTEWS may fail to account for environmental or structural restrictions, believed by Melhuish *et al.* (2015). This emphasises the need of using a combined approach, which allows settings to assess both learning circumstances and pedagogical practice quality (Iram Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015).

Finally, ECERS may be more effective in promoting accountability and proving compliance, but SSTEWS provides a deeper understanding of children's lived experiences. Together, they provide a more balanced and comprehensive view of quality. However, this raises a bigger issue in early childhood

quality assurance: the difficulty of integrating measured responsibility with the complexities of human interactions and learning processes argued by Biesta (2010).

What information do these methods provide?

ECERS and SSTEWS generate distinct but complementary types of data. ECERS generates quantitative data, allowing organisations to systematically assess environmental resources, procedures, and services outlined by Harms, Clifford and Cryer (2015). This systematic approach promotes benchmarking, simplifies inspection preparation, and gives clear evidence of regulatory compliance.

In contrast, SSTEWS generates qualitative data that reflects the complexities of children's experiences. By emphasising interactions, emotional environment, and continuous shared thinking, it provides insight into the quality of learning opportunities and connections in the context (Iran Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). Although more interpretative, this data can offer a more meaningful picture of children's daily lives, argued by Mashburn *et al.* (2008).

When used together, these techniques allow practitioners to evaluate both structural and process quality, resulting in a more comprehensive approach to quality assurance, as noted by the UNESCO (2022). However, the value of this data is ultimately determined by how it is interpreted and used in practice. Quantitative measures may oversimplify complicated experiences, but qualitative insights necessitate sophisticated analysis to guide real adjustments. This shows that data alone is insufficient, and that practitioner interpretation and professional judgement play an important role in transforming findings into better outcomes for children (Fenech, 2011).

What do they not tell us?

Despite their capabilities, neither ECERS nor SSTEWS provide a complete picture of quality. Both tools concentrate little emphasis on the viewpoints of key stakeholders, particularly parents and families, whose insights are critical for understanding children's experiences in a variety of settings (Goodall, 2018). This is essential since continuity between home and nursery is widely acknowledged as an important aspect in children's development, as emphasised by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006).

Furthermore, these approaches may not effectively account for broader contextual elements such as cultural diversity, community needs, and socioeconomic influences. Leadership, organisational

culture, and long-term strategic decision-making are all under-represented, despite their importance in shaping high-quality care (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007).

This shows that relying solely on ECERS and SSTEWS may limit the notion of quality. To develop a more inclusive and thorough knowledge, these strategies should be used with additional approaches such as stakeholder feedback, reflective supervision, and ongoing professional conversation. This limitation is significant because it shows that quality cannot be fully appreciated through observation alone, but rather through a more holistic approach that incorporates different views and contextual understanding (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013).

Using information to improve provision

The efficacy of quality assurance technologies is determined not just by the data they produce, but also by how that data is evaluated and applied (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016). ECERS findings can help identify gaps in environmental provision, resulting in targeted modifications that promote accessibility, engagement, and learning. However, without careful thinking, such adjustments may prioritise compliance over substantial improvement. This emphasises the necessity of reflective leadership in ensuring that data is used constructively rather than simply for compliance.

Similarly, SSTEWS findings can help with professional development by revealing areas where interactions can be improved, notably in communication, questioning, and emotional support. These enhancements directly benefit children's learning and well-being by encouraging more responsive and intentional pedagogy.

This technique is consistent with the Self-Assessment of Service Statement's (SASS) principles of ongoing reflection, evaluation, and improvement as outlined by Care Inspectorate Wales (2025). When used effectively, these tools go beyond measurement, enabling long-term and meaningful improvements in practice. Ultimately, their worth stems from their ability to inform reflective, child-centered methods that prioritise children's experiences and outcomes.

Conclusion

Finally, quality in early childhood education goes beyond meeting legislative standards; it necessitates a continuous commitment to reflection and development as argued by Moss (2016). Quality assurance technologies like ECERS and SSTEWS provide important possibilities for evaluating and improving

practice, each offering unique insights into structural and process quality.

While ECERS provides quantifiable information about environmental provision, SSTEW captures the complexities of interactions and emotional wellbeing. When used together, they enable a more balanced approach to quality assurance. However, their effectiveness is ultimately determined by how they are implemented in practice. This strengthens the premise that quality is a continuous process formed by critical reflection, practitioner competence, and a dedication to children's overall development (Urban *et al.*, 2012).

When combined with a reflective, evidence-based approach, these tools have the potential to improve the quality of early childhood provision. They help to improve children's outcomes and create high-quality, child-centered environments by promoting deliberate, responsive practice.

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