

Reflective Paper

Quality

Ofsted (2024) states that high quality early years education can affect the future health and happiness of children, in addition to their academic development over time.

Similarly, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework, (Department for Education (DfE), 2024) highlights high-quality early learning as being essential for children to reach their full potential. According to the Education Policy Institute (EPI) (2018), there is lack of clarity in relation to what good quality in Early Years Education and Childcare (ECEC) looks like. However, empirical research indicates that such quality is made up of two components being structural quality and process quality. Structural quality refers to more easily measured or controllable factors, such as ratios and teacher training opportunities, whereas process quality relates to the activities provided and the daily interactions between children, parents and practitioners.

Bonetti and Brown (2018) identify suitably qualified practitioners, favourable ratios and smaller class sizes as good indicators of quality provision. In partnership with these structural processes, Sim *et al* (2018) carried out research into process quality and found that most programmes and practices used, gave good outcomes in the areas of mathematics, literacy, socio-emotional and physical development. These results do have limitations, however, as they were mostly carried out in the United States and therefore may not relate in the same way to UK programmes. The study did not assess individual elements of practice, only looking at programmes in general and in addition, the impact of said programmes on different groups of children, for example those with additional learning needs (ALN) or economically disadvantaged children, was not investigated.

Local Government Association (2023) recognises there are barriers to providing high quality in early years settings and that the workforce should be supported in making improvements to provision. Barriers include a lack of clear policy direction caused by more than one government department being involved in decision making. Presently, decisions are made between the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions, thus resulting in conflicting information being given to providers and families. In addition, the provision of low-cost childcare has been prioritised over the need for high-quality childcare, which requires a higher amount of funding. Lawler (2021) points out that local authorities are only being paid around two thirds of the money needed to fund an early years' place and settings are therefore having to compensate for the shortfall by charging parents/carers more. This is not ideal in the current cost of living crisis.

UK Government (2025) states that difficulties in accessing affordable quality childcare and other basic services, such as baby and toddler groups, parenting support and appointments with health visitors, are also barriers to successful child development and are having a knock-on effect as more children are now reaching school age unable to perform basic skills such as fastening coats and using the toilet. In practice, this means valuable teaching time is being lost each day, again affecting the quality of service provided.

Other factors such as lack of professional development opportunities and low staff well-being, can cause disruption to the quality of care provided (Owston, Jones and Stanley, 2024). Leaders have little or no control over what qualifications their staff hold but can support staff well-being by regularly checking in with them, to see if they need extra support and being attentive to their needs (Birth to 5 Matters, 2025).

Due to the diversity of stakeholders in an early years setting, it can be difficult to please everyone, as they all have differing views of what is good practice. Therefore, it is

important to take everyone's views into consideration and for all parties to work together, whilst also keeping the child at the centre of all decisions made (Birth to 5 Matters, 2025). Education Endowment Foundation (2024) suggests that quality consists of three central elements, the first of which is to lay the grounds for success. In practice, this would mean taking all steps necessary to give your plans the best chance of success and ensuring everyone involved is passionate about providing the best quality possible. This could mean changing the environment, training for staff or amending communication methods. Secondly, progress made needs to be monitored. How effective are the current methods? Are they working as hoped or can improvements be made? Lastly, practitioners need to act on the evidence they find and be willing to make changes to the way they deliver and implement strategies, to achieve the best outcomes for the children in their care.

When looking at improving the quality of provision, many settings choose to use evidence-based rating systems, to assess the quality of their environment for children. Two such schemes are the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEW). The benefits and drawbacks to these systems are discussed below.

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)

The ECERS scale is an assessment tool which aims to measure the quality of programmes aimed at children from the age of three to five years. There have been several versions of this scale, the current one being known as ECERS-3, which aims to assess how well environmental provision and teacher-led interactions meet a child's needs in areas of social emotional, physical and cognitive development. Evidence is collected through classroom observations and a staff interview and can be

carried out by an external company or practitioners themselves. This can however lead to a biased response. An initial ECERS observation can last up to three hours (4C Helping Communities Help Children, 2025). Assessment is based on forty-three items, organised into seven sub-categories and each item is ranked on a scale of one to seven. The first six categories in the ECERS scale are child based, whereas the last category is parent/staff related. Categories include space and furnishings, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, interaction and programme structure. A score of one shows the setting is not meeting children's needs, whereas a score of seven indicates a setting with high levels of personalised care. This helps settings differentiate between whether their provision is just good or of high quality. Nasiopoulou *et al* (2022) states that the ECERS scale has been used internationally, by schools wishing to improve their quality levels and has been instrumental in guiding their actions when renewing policies and procedures. Whilst also promoting the use of ECERS as a quality assessment tool, Hestenes *et al* (2019) recommends considering carefully which version of the document to use, as results have been shown to come out lower on the new scale. Previous scales did not take into consideration the level of staff qualifications or the adult to child ratios in a setting and also did not involve a staff interview. The choice between versions therefore depends on what aspects of practice are required to be observed.

Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEWS)

The SSTEWS scale builds upon the ECERS system and is scored in a similar way, on a seven- point scale. There are only five sub-categories to SSTEWS as opposed to seven as in the ECERS scheme and only fourteen items are assessed, rather than forty-three in ECERS.

Tower Hamlets (GOV.UK, 2025) states that the SSTEWS audit should be carried out by someone who has good knowledge of child development and appropriate practice, for the best result to be achieved. Rather than being based on the learning environment,

the SSTEW scale focuses on children's emotional well-being, building trust, confidence and independence and supporting and extending their language and communication, in addition to supporting their learning and critical thinking and assessing the language and learning taking place (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015).

The use of SSTEW scales has both benefits and disadvantages. On the positive side, a study by Waters and McDonald (2020) found that most staff having undergone a SSTEW assessment, felt that the use of an objective scale made staff feel confident that judgments were valid and accurate, rather than being critical on a personal level. This was also due to the SSTEW system assessing pedagogy, rather than the individuals themselves. Participants also reported a sense of pride when achieving high scores on the SSTEW scale and said this motivated them to improve their practice against descriptors where they had not scored so well. Practitioners who chose to use the SSTEW scales as a planning tool for pedagogic improvement, found the system to be easily accessible and the language detailed and explicit, thus avoiding any confusion over its meaning.

As SSTEW assesses the pedagogies of early years staff, rather than the environment as with ECERS, there is the possibility of staff being nervous about being observed and feeling pressure to perform as they feel the assessor wants them to, rather than being genuine. This view is supported by Waters and McDonald (2020) who found that early years staff reported feelings of anxiety and exposure at being watched and potentially judged on their practice. Issues such as this could be avoided by staff having access to the SSTEW documentation before the assessment, to become familiar with its contents. This would give them some opportunity to self assess before being formally observed. This would also give opportunity for staff to compare their own findings against those of an assessor and to discuss any inconsistencies.

During the same study, some staff questioned the effectiveness of the SSTEWS system for children who display some sort of developmental delay. Whilst a child's readiness for language and exploration through talk may affect how they engage with sustained shared thinking, it is also thought that an adult's constant classification of a child as not ready, is unhelpful and that there should be a belief that they *can* achieve, rather than not. This aligns with sections 1.12 and 1.18 of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework (DfE, 2024), which states that practitioners need to be ambitious for all children, considering their individual needs and rates of development, whilst also being aware that their practice may need to be adapted to suit each child. Waters and McDonald (2020) found that the SSTEWS system did not really challenge the negative attitude of staff. The persistent use of negative classification may be down to lack of continuous professional development relating to lower achieving children, or those with additional learning needs (ALN), and how they access learning differently to their peers. Staff may need training in adaptive teaching methods, to assist them in supporting ALN children to access the same content as their peers but at their own level (Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework, 2024, section 1.19)

Conclusion

Having researched both the ECERS and SSTEWS scales, it would appear that both schemes have a mainly positive impact on the delivery of quality provision for young children. As both schemes focus on different aspects of provision, namely the environment and the standard of child/adult interactions, the use of both systems alongside each other, would support the holistic development of the child, as stated in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework (DfE, 2024), whose principles state a children need both positive relationships and an enabling environment, to develop and learn at their own rate. It must be kept in mind however, that each setting, as well as each child, is unique. Therefore, adapting practice to suit the children and community in the locality, will increase the chances of success for all children (Early Career Framework, DfE, 2019, standard 5) and hopefully encourage better parental engagement and partnership working.

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