

Reflective Paper - Part 2

According to Moss (2016) quality refers to the ability of professionals to identify and measure universal, objective, and stable norms. A 'quality' early childhood service is one that meets these standards. Eadie *et al.* (2022) and Mathers *et al.* (2013, cited in Rudoe, 2020) maintain that in early childhood education and care quality is defined in three domains: process, structural and system. Understanding how to improve quality in early childhood education and care depends on consistent and clear evidence across these domains. Melhuish *et al.* (2015, cited in Siraj *et al.*, 2019) and Hyson and Biggar Tomlinson (2014, p.37) say that evidence shows that high-quality educational experiences are important in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. They improve the likelihood of educational success by promoting children's short-term and long-term development. Rudoe (2020) states that a quality setting should place emphasis on the 'whole child' and aim to meet the needs of the 'unique child', however developmental outcomes is the governmental focus. Nevertheless, the best possible desired outcomes will be achieved if the provision is of high quality.

Welsh Government (2022) maintain that Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) is when children and adults work collaboratively to clarify a concept, problem solve or evaluate an activity. Conversations take place with both the child and the adult contributing ideas to clarify possible conclusions together. Dickinson (2006, cited in Neale and Pino-Pasternak, 2016) and Hildebrandt and Musholt (2020) point out that research has highlighted that extended adult-child interaction which is known as SST frames emergent literacy and cognitive development for young children in early childhood settings. Howard *et al.* (2020) and Siraj *et al.* (2015, cited in Siraj *et al.*, 2019) believe that it is important that SST takes place in early years settings. There was a Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEW) scale which was developed to assess interactional quality in these settings. It encompasses aspects of process quality based on practice in effective settings and developmental theories. Siraj, Cheeseman and Kingston (2016) say that the scale has 14 items included in it which are divided into five subscales. These are: building trust, confidence and independence, social and emotional well-being, supporting and extending language and communication, supporting learning and critical thinking, and assessing learning and language.

Siraj *et al.* (2023) point out that an important theory that supports pedagogical quality is Bowlby's attachment theory. This is based on the importance of caregivers and children building trusting relationships which results in the children being responsive to the caregivers when they encourage development of skills. Fostering positive teacher-child relationships could increase the likelihood of Sustained Shared Thinking taking place. Bowlby (1989, cited in Howard *et al.*, 2020) states that the STEW scale considers practices and relational pedagogy that promotes practitioners to engage in affectionate, warm and responsive interactions with children. Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) and Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) maintain that results of the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) study show that SST was encouraged by the most effective settings, however it does not take place frequently. In the settings that achieved the rating 'excellent' or 'good' there was a balance of staff initiating activities and children initiating activities. This shows the importance of settings encouraging children to initiate activities as often as the staff.

Purdon (2014) and Wild (2011) suggest that SST links with Vygotsky's beliefs that the role of the adult is important to extend children's learning and development. The adult can support the child's critical thinking skills and language development. He believes that the Zone of Proximal Development highlights the gap between what a child can achieve independently and what they can achieve with scaffolding from an adult or more knowledgeable peer. Moreover, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) believes that results of the REPEY study highlighted that the more highly qualified staff used more SST interactions. They also partook in the most effective interactions with children which in turn aids their holistic development. Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2003) say that results of the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project are consistent with the REPEY results. They show that trained teachers participated in the most SST interactions with children resulting in more effective interactions overall. When qualified teachers supported staff with less qualifications, the less qualified staff's pedagogy was better. Nevertheless, Wieduwilt, Lehl and Anders (2023) maintain that study results show that professional experience of the preschool teachers and professional development activities were not predictive of process quality.

Macdonald, Gealy and Tinney (2021) say that results of a study show that SSTEWS scores improved after professional development took place. Following on from the training, the quality of adult-child interaction had advanced. The training intervention had an impact on adult-child interactions and adult behaviours linked to social development and self-regulation, as well as aiding socio-emotional growth.

According to Meade and Kwan (2022) following professional development based on the SSTEWS scale in New Zealand staff weaved data knowledge from the scale into assessment, teaching, planning and evaluation. This concluded with positive outcomes in the team's culture, play-based practices and the communication competence of both teachers and children. However, according to Gealy *et al.* (2022) Early Childhood Education and Care professional learning occurs in an environment that regulatory systems, funding and provider types can cause challenges when building transformative, systematic and sustainable professional learning.

Furthermore, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2008, cited in Neale and Pino-Pasternak, 2017) state that for training courses based on SST to be effective professionals must ensure that the guidance is not vague and provide concrete examples and materials for teachers to use in classroom practice.

According to Gordon *et al.* (2015) and Betancur *et al.* (2021) the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) is commonly used to assess the quality of preschool programmes and their ability to improve children's school readiness and child development. However, McDoniel *et al.* (2022) suggest that a study showed that the ECERS-R measured the domains of classroom quality but did not connect to changes in children's school readiness skills between autumn and spring in the preschool year. Hestenes (2019) and Mariano *et al.* (2019) maintain that there are forty-three items in the ECERS-R scale which are split into seven subscales. These are: Personal Care Routines, Space and Furnishings, Activities, Language-Reasoning, Interaction, Parents and Staff and Program Structure.

Botsoglou *et al.* (2019) and Lower and Cassidy (2007) say that the ECERS-R assessment is carried out through observations that usually take three to five hours and include an interview with a teacher. The ECERS-R is rated based on the seven sub-scales. Kulikovskaya *et al.* (2021) point out that the ECERS-R scale was drawn upon Vygotsky's views on social constructivism. He believed that through interactions with adults and peers the children's knowledge is constructed.

Therefore, it is important practitioners view the children as knowledgeable and competent individuals with their own world views.

Kruty *et al.* (2021) state that some of the observation scales in ECERS assess the educational environment of a class or nursery. Reggio Emilia experts believe the environment should be viewed as the 'third teacher'. Bull, Yao and Ng (2017) found that a study highlighted that there were validity issues with the ECERS-R scale, namely regarding response process and structural validity. Mayer and Beckh (2016) and Gordon *et al.* (2013) agree that response process validity can be a problem due to stop-scoring instructions. Due to the indicators of one dimension a low score may be given on an item which can result in the higher quality of the ECEC setting on other dimensions being missed. With regards to structural validity the ECERS-R structure is highly dependent on the sample therefore may be instable, this could be because of the mixture of several quality aspects within the items. Furthermore, Bentancur *et al.* (2021) maintain that indicators of low quality can be overrepresented such as structural features for example space, availability of materials and safety. Process quality which includes stimulating and nurturing interactions is more highly emphasised among indicators of medium to high quality, therefore it is impossible to distinguish between structural and process quality.

Kulikovskaya *et al.* (2021) say that many countries use the ECERS-R scale for example the United Kingdom, United States of America, Spain, Norway, and Greece. Every country has varied approaches to education, but they all assess the quality of their education with the ECERS-R tool. According to Fujisawa (2023) and Grammatikopoulos *et al.* (2018) ECERS was created in the United States of America and is used regularly in more than twenty countries. However, when using it and interpreting scoring results in different cultural contexts caution should be exercised as different cultural backgrounds will influence ECEC goals and practices in each country. Furthermore, Li *et al.* (2014) point out that modifications and changes may be necessary to make the measure more relevant and appropriate for varying cultural and social contexts.

Veraksa *et al.* (2018) state that a study they participated in found no direct correlation between preschool children's social-emotional development and environmental quality. Brunsek *et al.* (2017) maintain that results of a different study

show that the ECERS-R scale identifies quality factors that impact children's well-being however the link is weak. Kruty *et al.* (2021) believe that the ECERS-R scale and the SSTEWS scale assess the environment that frames children's emotional well-being. They also prepare them to start school actively due to the scales assessing the development of children's activity and freewill which results in quality improvements being made. Nevertheless, Veraksa, Gavrilova and Pons (2020) found in results of a study that although social-emotional development is important and it is affected by teacher-child interaction, it is not fully feasible to analyse this using the ECERS-R scale.

Pianta (2012, cited in Grammatikopoulos, 2017) and Sylva *et al.* (2014) maintain that most of the past research based on the ECERS-R scale highlighted a positive connection with children's outcomes. However, more recently Gordon *et al.* (2013, cited in Li *et al.*, 2016) found in results of a study that there were no meaningful correlations between children's reading and maths outcomes and the ECERS-R total and factor scores. Brunsek *et al.* (2017) say that the ECERS-R was critiqued as a measure of childcare quality and the results showed weak associations with early learning outcomes. Nevertheless, Setodji, Schaack and Le (2018) point out that associations between the process-oriented components of the scale and child outcomes may be obscured by the overall ECERS-R score's overemphasis on the physical environment. Furthermore, Whitebrook *et al.* (1989, cited in Vermeer *et al.*, 2016) state that the main method of assessing process quality is observation, which has been shown to be more accurate in predicting the outcomes of children than structural quality indicators like group size, staff-to-child ratio and the type and cost of care.

According to Melhuish and Gardiner (2017) and Melhuish and Gardiner (2019) to gain higher ECERS-R and SSTEWS scores evidence from the SEED study shows that the strongest predictor in private settings is having a higher mean level of staff qualification. Also, there was an increased probability of gaining 'good or better' ECERS-R scores and 'excellent' SSTEWS scores with a higher overall staff to child ratio. Furthermore, having a large number of places and a minimum age of 2 for children impacts the scores positively. Howard *et al.* (2024) states that the ECERS-R scale and the SSTEWS scale both aim to identify high quality provision whilst suggesting opportunities to sustain and promote provision of a high quality. However,

they vary in foci and the approach to measuring quality. Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015, p.5) state that the ECERS-R scale measured the quality of resources, space, curricular provision and activities but the SSTEW adds a focus on self-regulation, well-being and partaking in sensitive interactions with others. This in turn develops focused thinking. To conclude, Kruty *et al.* (2021) say that both the ECERS-R and SSTEW scales are effective methods of assessing the quality of ECEC settings. They aim to promote the importance of high-quality childcare settings and ensure each setting is going above and beyond the National Minimum Standards.

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