

Reflective Paper

Quality in early years can be hard to define as it is important to consider the interpretation of quality is different for everyone according to Pianta, Downer and Hamre (2016) therefore there is not one single definition(Eadie *et al.*, 2022). However, Sollars (2020) does define quality as the standard of something as measured against other things of a similar kind for example, care , experience, and practice. Hussain and Juma (2006) agrees with this by stating that quality is a relative construct , meaningful only from the point of view from those judging against a particular standard. This shows that quality can be measured to ensure a high standard of care for the children. In addition, this also means that quality is essential in early years. As quality is difficult to define visible thinking may help to picture what quality should look , sound, and feel like (Harvard Graduate School of Education ,2022). A quality setting should look colourful , fun, and stimulating as well as sounding like engagement, laughter and peaceful followed by feeling safe, secure, and respectful. Welsh Government (2014) agrees with this by stating that quality settings should be inclusive and reactive to each child's individuals needs placing them at the heart.

Quality and a strong foundation in the early years is crucial according to Ofsted (2023) as a range of studies show that children who experienced high quality early years provision went on to achieve high outcomes at school and develop further holistically which is necessary for lifelong learning. The early years intervention report (Allen,2011) Findings state that a child's development and understanding score at just 22 months old can serve as an extremely accurate predictor of that person's educational outcomes for the future more precisely by the time they are 26 years old. This shows how important a child's earliest years are and that a high standard of quality needs to be maintained all the way through a child's life especially at the start which practitioners and parents may not realise .

As practitioners are aware it is vital for children to have access to high quality settings as the Effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project findings show that higher quality setting and qualified practitioner the higher quality overall

outcome for the children (Siraj and Taggart, 2013). The findings also state that poor quality settings hold no significant value. Practitioners also know that continued professional development (CPD) can affect the quality of their practice and as a result the children may suffer (Bubb and Earley, 2007). To support this the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project findings show under part 4.14 that practitioners who were committed to CPD, their activities were of a higher quality and more engaging for the children (Siraj *et al.*, 2002). UNICEF (no date) shows practitioners how important quality of care is as under article 25 children are entitled to review regarding their care and treatment.

There are however barriers to quality that need to be considered such as time, money, lack of training, overworked staff, poor leadership, poor provision, and poor communication etc. According to Hester, Bridges and Rollins (2020) the main barrier is overworked and underpaid staff. As a result, staff are less enthusiastic and less willing to learn. Overall affecting the quality of the environment and children's development in a negative way. Furthermore, Bartlett (2004) agrees with this by stating that educational activities will suffer as a result of overworked teachers.

Quality can be measured in a number of different ways according to U.S Department of Education (2014). These include tools, rating scales, inspections, reports, expectations, research, feedback, and reflection etc. Williams (2016) states that self-reflection is vital in the form of quality enhancement to improve and measure the standard of quality within a setting. The quality-of-care review is a statutory requirement under care inspectorate Wales (CIW) that allows practitioners to breakdown self-reflection into three areas which are monitoring, reviewing, and improving (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2020). Practitioners state that self-assessment of service statement (SASS) is a critical aspect in order to establish and maintain a high quality of care. There must be a continuous review into the quality of care under regulation 16 (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2020).

This reflective paper will include in depth information on two tools that measure and ensure a high standard of quality as well as strive to get beyond quality. As Under standard 18.1 of the national minimum standards (NMS) there should be effective quality monitoring systems in place (Welsh Government, 2016). However, these

tools are not statutory requirements. The tools being discussed are sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing (SSTEW) and Early childhood Environmental rating scale (ECERS).

To begin, ECERS is an environmental rating scale suitable for children aged three-five years old, 70 Percent of the group have to be three or older if they are any younger then the Infant/toddler environment rating scale (ITERS) is to be used as it is more age appropriate (Coventry City Council, 2019). ECERS is broken down into six sections these include space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and literacy, learning activities, interactions, and programme structure (Environment Rating Scale, No Date). The rating scale is measured using numbers one – seven, one meaning inadequate, three meaning minimal, five meaning good and seven meaning excellent. Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (2011) states that the ECERS observation is a three-hour time sample and they believe this is enough time. Bradbury (2014) disagrees by stating that this is not enough time to effectively observe and make decisions regarding a settings outcome. PACEY (2016) further agrees and says that it would be beneficial if this observation was carried over a few days to gain an accurate representation of the setting as every day is different when working with children in the early years. The assessors are usually locally advisory teachers or setting managers. If the observer does not view the requirements being met in this time frame, then they are therefore unable to tick it off the list provided. Additionally, this is unreliable as if the observers were to stay for a longer period of time then they may view more requirements being met. ECERS does have a complicated scoring system which can be seen as a barrier as if you tick all of section three, half of section five and all of section seven. That setting will unfortunately be on a level four due to not completing two requirements under section five which can be seen as unfair in some cases according to Kaarby and Tandberg (2023). The ECERS observation should be carried out at the most active part of the day when most children are in attendance according to Montes *et al.* (2018) as this is when the children are most interactive. However, this is not always the case due to assessor's busy work loads and time schedules. When carrying out this observation assessors are forbidden to ask staff questions or give interviews this may be an issue as Gross (2018) states that communication during assessment is extremely important to gain knowledge and

insight. As a result of having a large number of assessors a negative is that personal opinions sometimes overrule therefore creating a verity standard of quality throughout. To critique, assessors may also have a personal basis towards some settings for varying reasons. This type of observation requires assessors to move around in order to come to a result holistically. However, [Sheridan \(2000\)](#) states that some assessors stay in one place making notes meaning that they miss out on what is going on in other areas of the setting. Resulting in the setting being marked down in areas which they may be fulfilling which is why they believe self-evaluation is more efficient.

Although there are many critiques to this tool there are a number of advantages as according to [Stuart and Sweeney \(No Date\)](#) ECERS is a nationally recognised tool meaning that governments and parents nationally can view each settings rating and understand the scoring and feedback system. The ECERS tool values play based learning as seen through its objectives therefore this allows more individualized teaching opportunities meaning that the actives are catered to each child's individual needs. This promotes the quality of each child's development as the activities planned will interest and intrigue them. This links well with the new curriculum for Wales as the ECERS holds similar values for early years education ([Welsh Government ,2022](#)). According to [Gordon *et al.* \(2013\)](#) not all practice is effective and of the same standard and that is why ECERS provides an objective for research-based practice so that practitioners are able to raise the standard of quality care. Practitioners are able to use outcome of the ECERS observation to boost and improve quality in the areas that have been highlighted by the assessor. As stated by [Wallace and Kirkman \(2017\)](#) an outsider's perspective helps individuals to improve. However, the ECERS is unable to provide practitioners with in-depth information on how to improve as the boxes are simple yes and no answers. The ECERS drives quality by pushing setting to improve and what do to better for the children in their care to get an overall higher score . As according to [the National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\) \(1993\)](#) the quality of the space and materials provided by practitioners affects the level of involvement from the children and the quality of interaction between practitioners/carers and children.

To move on SSTEWE is a quality assurance method also for children aged two-five years old (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2021). Similarly, to the ECERS SSTEWE is also measured using numbers one-seven. According to Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) before the observation the assessor should be familiar with the setting. This allows the observer to have a holistic approach and form quality professional relationships with practitioners in the setting. Howard *et al.* (2020) states that SSTEWE observations are usually carried out in pairs when staff attendance allows. This can be seen as a positive as it helps to rule out personal opinions and bias being considered unlike ECERS. To contrast to the ECERS, SSTEWE allows assessors to ask practitioners questions and see planning. This means that the SSTEWE assessors are able to gain a deeper insight when carrying out observations. Through SSTEWE assessments the information required to improve the provision is provided in the form of a tick list. Additionally, the assessor has to see something being carried out of an average of three times in order to tick yes according to Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2023), this allows the assessor to ensure that this level of quality is a regular occurrence and not just a one off. Compared to ECERS as the assessors only have to see it once within the three hours. SSTEWE assessments are carried out on a regular basis to be more specific However, to compare ECERS is carried out twice a year. SSTEWE highlights the importance of interactions and sustained shared thinking (SST) which helps to raise quality as Essex County Council (No Date) states that SST promotes learning through sharing skills, experiences, and knowledge. Which according to Welsh Government (2021) can only be achieved when children's emotional well-being is also being supported. Emotional well-being can be supported through the development of positive relationships with parents. This provides children with secure, safe foundations for exploration. Furthermore, Moss (2016, p. 8-9) states that "quality" was a choice, not a necessity' this shows that practitioners need to unite, work together, and guide each other to get beyond quality therefore making it a necessity (UK Government, 2013). In Addition, practitioners use the SSTEWE information gathered to boost quality of care.

There are however barriers to SSTEWE assessments such as professional judgement. Procedures Online (2020) defines professional judgement as applying knowledge, experience, and skills to develop an opinion or decision. This can be

seen as a disadvantage according to Symonds *et al.* (2018) because assessors work closely with practitioners when carrying out SSTEW forming opinions on people and how the setting is run which could cloud their judgement.

Furthermore, SSTEW like ECERS does not tell practitioners how to improve but shows areas the setting is lacking in. However, SSTEW does consist of interviews with staff members where they are able to ask questions and are provided with feedback that can help give context and therefore boost quality.

To conclude, both of these quality assurance methods have positives and negatives that need to be considered. However, both do help practitioners to acknowledge areas of improvement highlight where quality is lacking. SSTEW drives quality promoting SST and children's wellbeing. Furthermore, ECERS drives quality by promoting an inclusive and stimulating environment perfect for exploring.

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