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Review of ECERS-3 and Early Years Wales Quality for All

Quality in early years education is often perceived as providing a high standard of care and ensuring that it is of equal or higher level to that of the current legislation (Butler, n.d.). However, the subject of quality in the early years has caused much debate due to varying definitions across different articles and there being no official definition provided by the education department (Rudoe, 2020; Hutchinson et al., 2020; Local Government Association, 2023). Pianta et al. (2016) concluded that quality generally includes four key aspects; the programme's structural elements, general features of the learning environment and activities, the direct teacher-student interactions, and the collection of data regarding quality ratings and improvement systems. Many practitioners' views on quality are influenced by government legislation and their personal and professional histories (Cottle and Alexander, 2012; Butler, 2024). Through further discourse with early years practitioners, Cottle and Alexander (2012) were able to identify that children's experiences, and the training and development of staff is also a key aspect to quality in the early years, this view is also supported by the Teacher Development Trust (2024) and Early Years Alliance (2024).

Quality is essential within the early years to provide children with the best opportunities for well-being and development (Butler and Hardy, n.d.). There are several statutory requirements within the early years in Wales, including CIW and ESTYN, that settings are legally required to follow, however, research is currently investigating the provision of high-quality care that goes beyond statutory requirements (Potts, 2016; Lewis and West, 2016). The benefits are still in consideration among researchers; however, the consensus is that legal requirements may not suit individual settings as they are too broad and do not cater to local issues (Bertram et al., 2016). Therefore, early years settings should be using additional methods of measuring and ensuring quality. This reflective paper aims to identify and analyse two methods used within early years settings in Wales, then compare these methods to identify how they improve quality beyond legal requirements.

A commonly used method of measuring quality used within the early years sector globally, is the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS). ECERS is an observational tool used internationally to assess the process quality of early years settings, primarily for children between the ages of 3 and 5 (NH Connections, 2025). The first ECERS tool was devised in 1980 and has since evolved with early years legislation and guidance to create the current tool, Early Years Environmental Rating Scale – 3rd Edition (ECERS-3) (NH Connections, 2025). The ECERS-3 comprises of 35 items to be assessed within each base room, separated into six categories for ease of use: Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Literacy, Learning Activities, Interaction, and Programme Structure (Environmental Rating Scales, 2025). These categories are designed to cover all areas of early years education and care, this promotes an equity-based approach to improving the quality of provision throughout the setting (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2020; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002).

The ECERS-3 is an easily accessible document and is clear to understand, this enables clear expectations across all settings using this method of internal monitoring. This can result in settings of all levels being able to use ECERS-3 in a manner benefiting their situation. However, due to its broad nature and the fact that it originated in the American early years sector, the ECERS-3 does not reflect the Early Years Wales curriculum (Hestenes *et al.*, 2019; Dallimore, 2019) and as a result, does not cater to issues in early years settings in Wales, research has highlighted this issue in other countries (Garvis *et al.*, 2017). Additional methods of quality assurance that are created on a national scale or are adapted from other countries, lack an ability to resolve local issues and as a result can negatively impact the quality of a setting (Betancur *et al.*, 2021). A key benefit of the ECERS-3 is that it is designed to be used within each base room throughout a setting, this enables all aspects to be assessed as opposed to only one room being considered the representation of all rooms within the setting (The Scottish Government, 2020).

Contrasting to the ECERS-3, which is an internationally used quality assessment tool, the Early Years Wales Quality for All (QfA) programme is specifically designed for the early years sector within Wales. Revised in 2022, the QfA service is an accreditation programme for early years settings across Wales (Cwlwm, 2022), that provides assessment and support to enable settings to provide high quality services for their stakeholders (Early Years Wales, 2023). Early Years Wales states that the QfA process is an ongoing cycle of reflection, assessment, and accreditation (Early Years Wales, 2023). The QfA accreditation consists of a reflection of service, professional discussion with an experienced assessor, observation of practice, and an annual re-accreditation. All this is in aid of providing an external point of view to improve the quality of provision within the early years. Early Years Wales have worked alongside many organisations including Chwarae Cymru, NDNA Cymru, PACEY Cymru, as well as others (Early Years Wales, 2020a). Together, these organisations aim to improve quality in early years settings across Wales and support them in preparing for CIW and ESTYN inspections through programmes such as QfA.

The QfA assessment process looks at three key sections that contribute towards excellent quality of care, the staff, the children's health and wellbeing, and the holistic approach to children's play (Early Years Wales, 2020b). Regarding staff, the QfA process aims to help settings understand their staff recruitment, interaction, management and development. The qualifications of staff within early years settings, have proven to have a direct impact on the quality of provision. Research has shown that settings containing more early years qualified staff, either from an educational degree or post-16 qualification, impacts the child positively throughout their life. Therefore, as the findings from Manning et al. (2017) state, the more qualified staff in an early years setting, the higher the provision of quality will be regarding children's well-being and development. Regardless of these known benefits, many early years managers and setting leaders may not have an awareness of the impact this makes and therefore hire staff with fewer qualifications and only hire enough qualified staff to meet both CIW and ESTYN requirements (Podolsky et al., 2016). Therefore, an

external body coming in and reviewing the staff hiring process and qualifications, as offered by QfA, may encourage settings to increase their ratio of qualified to non-qualified staff resulting in higher quality within the setting. This is an issue that is not raised within the ECERS-3 assessment.

When comparing both the ECERS-3 and the Early Years Wales Quality for All, it is evident that they aim to achieve the same goal, ensuring high-quality provision within the early years. However, where the ECERS-3 is an internal tool, the QfA requires an external body to analyse and critique the setting; both internal and external assessments have benefits. Advantages of internal assessment includes minimal disruption to the continuity of the day for both children and staff, while a benefit of external is the ability to view a situation in an un-biased manner (Vitello and Williamson, 2017).

The ECERS-3 assessment tool states what is required of the setting to achieve a score of 1 (inadequate) to 7 (excellent) in each of the categories available (Early *et al.*, 2018), however, other than the requirements for each category, there is no clear advice on how to improve quality to ways to ensure that a high standard is maintained (Gordon *et al.*, 2015). Whereas the QfA requires a qualified member of Early Years Wales who will provide an in-depth evaluation and discussion on areas of improvement for the settings. By providing this service, the QfA furthers the use and implementation of feedback. Unfortunately, the initial assessment process when purchasing the QfA service requires a 6 to 12-month period (Early Years Wales, 2020b). This therefore delays the changes required to improve the settings quality. The ECERS-3 process requires a period of 3 hours within each base room and additional time in which the internal assessor will form an action plan regarding their findings (Philson, 2018). This enables changes to be enacted almost immediately, promoting quicker improvement and adjustments to support quality of provision.

An aspect that is highlighted by the QfA is that of the health and well-being of the children within the setting. Health and well-being are deemed by many professionals as essential, if not more essential than academic achievement within the early years (Ofsted, 2024). In contrast to the QfA, the ECERS-3 does not mention the well-being of children. Under personal care routines, is a small section based on health practice, but this looks at hygiene practice as opposed to emotional health (Childcare Resources Inc., n.d.). Instead, they have a focus on development on gross and fine motor-skills, mathematical and literacy achievements. The focus on academic goals causes many practitioners to feel restricted in the opportunities they can provide for their children (Wood, 2004 cited in Barblett *et al.*, 2016). This is an area in which the ECERS-3 tool does not support the CIW and ESTYN requirements, unlike the Early Years Wales QfA. Furthermore, it has been recognised that children's wellbeing is often unconsciously put second to academic achievement (Clarke, 2020), a practice that is reflected in the requirements of the ECERS-3 tool. Therefore, the use of ECERS-3 alone can negatively impact a setting. However, when in used in conjunction with an emotional well-being scale such as the LEUVEN scale, it is able to achieve a more rounded critique and recognition of the physical setting, staff interaction, academic achievement, and the children's emotional health and well-being.

This paper has been able to conclude that quality is a key aspect within the early years and that there are many systems available to support excellent quality within settings. In regard to both the ECERS-3 and Early Years Wales Quality for All, different aspects of quality are assessed and measured. The ECERS-3 looks at the physical environment, routines, and academic opportunities and achievements, the QfA looks deeper into the interactions, staff qualifications, and the emotional health and well-being of the children.

Despite the ease of access and use within settings, the ECERS-3's inability to evolve directly with the early years' curriculum within Wales, is counter-productive to providing high-quality care. Using it alongside emotional scales improves its similarity to the Welsh curriculum, however, this results in extra work for staff members that

are often over-worked as is. This will result in incomplete or late assessments, and often the action plan is created and rarely used. For these reasons, to improve the quality of provision within early years settings in Wales, the QfA is considered of a higher standard and is able to directly impact and improve quality.

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