

The term quality is a contentious issue, owing to its subjective character. Numerous studies have revealed that stakeholders have varying perspectives on quality and value different aspects of practice (Canning and Reed 2012; Cohrssen *et al.*, 2023; Siraj *et al.*, 2019). The concept of educational quality, as well as how to measure quality, are difficult issues within the UK educational system (Rudoe, 2020).

Quality, as noted by Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) is not just a desired characteristic but also a political tool, a value-laden term intended to influence opinions about the appearance and goal of early childhood programming (Bertram and Pascal, 2018). Additionally, according to Karim (2010), a high-quality setting must include a healthy working atmosphere, a well-balanced structure, competent and skilled practitioners as well as the availability of resources.

Furthermore, Canning and Reed (2012) describe quality as being an interconnected complicated web with strands such as leadership, pedagogical understanding, personality, compassion, love, and commitment to principles that teach us that children and what we offer for them are important. In addition to this Siraj and Hallet (2013) highlight how effective leadership is an important aspect of establishing high-quality services for young children and their families.

Moreover, according to Department for Education (2013); Gambaro, Steward and Waldfogel, (2013); Melhuish (2016) they define quality as being a combination of structural and process characteristics. It can favour modernist approaches to measurable and assessable quality features while also reflecting the less tangible characteristics that frequently drive leaders and practitioners to establish quality in the early years. However, the challenge with modernist approaches to quality is that they are guided by a set of established, quantifiable measures, what cannot be assessed is lost in these quality metrics (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016).

Melhuish (2016) points out the quality indicators for the types of structural and process quality within the early years. They consist of measures to improve child to adult ratio, the implementation of minimum standards and qualifications, curriculum and reporting requirements, trained staff, and effective leadership (Eadie *et al.*, 2022; Wysłowska and Slot, 2020). This is supported by the introduction of nationally defined quality standards to ensure high-quality childcare and education (Melhuish, 2016).

However, it is important to emphasise that while structural characteristics are easier to measure and more popular among policymakers, process quality is the most powerful indicator of children's outcomes (Eadie *et al.*, 2022; Mathers and Smees, 2014).

According to Wysłowska & Slot (2020) quality in early years is a complex notion that sparks controversy among academics, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Sociocultural views from Vygotsky, 1978 and bioecological theory from Bronfenbrenner, 1979 all serve as frameworks for identifying quality characteristics (Eadie *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, Canning and Reed (2012) point out that high-quality practice is evident in routine practice, although to improve children's experiences it is important to comprehend these qualities and identify areas for improvement. To be able to provide quality care, practitioners need to be able to lead practice, take an active role in ongoing professional development, safeguard children, communicate effectively, be a good role model, and act professionally in any type of quality improvement review. The reason is due to evidence that the quality of the organisation's structure influences children's outcomes (Canning and Reed, 2012).

As stated by Welsh Government (2013) quality care and education are essential for young children's successful development.

Therefore, it is evident practitioners are embracing quality improvement projects and confronting change management tactics front on. This has led to new ways of thinking as well as changes in local and national policy across the UK (Canning and Reed, 2012; Sylva *et al.*, 2020).

Research from Osgood and Muehlschlegel (2017) report states that the early years are evaluated using government defined quality standards which narrows down particular measurements of child outcomes at developmental stages.

As pointed out by Parker (2013) the UK government evaluated quality by revising its inspection processes and curriculum for children under the age of seven.

According to Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) there were separate care and education inspections conducted in the early years under Ofsted, relating to either the care of the children or the education, resulting in some settings being inspected twice and significant variations in requirements for the different sectors. This has now changed, and all early years settings are subject to the same inspection. However, Ofsted has faced criticism for lacking sufficient expertise in the early years, which has led to concerns that the recommendations and results may not be entirely accurate (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016).

Therefore, the government's attention is now focused on quality. Australian state governments created a nationwide quality guideline for all early childhood education and care (ECEC). ECEC provides high-quality early learning experiences that benefit children's cognitive, language, and social development in the short and long-term, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cohrssen *et al.*, 2023; Eadie *et al.*, 2022; Fox and Geddes 2016; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015).

According to research by Bertram and Pascal (2018), there is evidence from worldwide that shows how high-quality ECEC can positively affect children's psychological and behavioural development, provide opportunities for numeracy and literacy competencies, encourage better social behaviour, and be more cost effective (Bertram and Pascal, 2018).

In addition to this, the nationwide quality guidelines went into effect in 2012 and were intended to improve uniformity across state and territory educational systems. It was also accompanied by the

implementation of a national early years learning framework and a national quality standard evaluation and rating system (ACECOA, 2018).

Moreover, as Ofsted's views of quality in ECEC are only a snapshot, quality in ECEC is assessed using rating scales such as ECERS-E, SSTEWS, or a joint Ofsted inspection (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016; Kingston and Siraj, 2015).

Building a Brighter Future acknowledges that enhancing the quality of ECEC necessitates concentrating on four areas, the learning environment, staff, leadership, and child experiences. The framework for joint inspection considers aspects including resource quality, safety, and appropriateness, and emphasises the importance of the environment.

The Welsh Government (2013) also emphasises the need for a high-quality learning environment, stating that surroundings and resources should be of the greatest quality to ensure that children's experiences are not limited (Esytyn, 2019; Welsh Government, 2013).

Furthermore, underpinned by the research of the REPEY project due to the discrepancies between research and everyday practice, based upon the ECERS- E rating scale, the sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing scale SSTEWS was introduced as a quality assurance model focusing more on the role of the adult and the pedagogy within settings to support learning and development (Gealy *et al.*, 2020; Howard *et al.*, 2018; Kingston and Siraj, 2015).

As highlighted by Siraj *et al.* (2015) it is recommended to utilise the SSTEWS scale in conjunction with other rating scales such as ECERS – E or ITERS-R. In addition to this Kingston and Siraj (2015) point out how the early childhood environment rating scale ECERS-E and the infant toddler environment rating scale ITERS-R have a similar scoring methodology that was comparable to the SSTEWS scale. According to Sylva *et al.* (2010) the SSTEWS scale is strongly associated with the ECERS-E.

Moreover, the ECERS-E scale provides a structured method to enhance the quality of early childhood services to achieve better long-term results. The scale has been used globally and is commonly used to measure the quality of settings (Iles, 2019). While the ECERS-E measures education, surroundings, and peer mentorship and has 18 elements over 4 subscales, the SSTEWS scale has 14 items spread across 5 subscales and looks at practice to build children's emotional health and sustained shared thinking. Both scales use an observation based methodology to assess quality (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, n.d; Howard *et al.*, 2018; Siraj *et al.*, 2019).

The SSTEWS scale uses a seven-point scoring system which includes social and emotional well-being, independence, self-assurance, and trust-building, as well as the assessment of language and learning. As stated by Siraj *et al.* (2015) the SSTEWS scale is made up of five subscales, the first two evaluate how well staff members foster cooperative play and provide age-appropriate consistent conflict resolution procedures, as well as how well children's autonomy and socioemotional development are supported.

The following three sustained shared thinking subscales that follow are all aimed at assisting children in developing their emotional control, goal setting, accomplishment and executive functioning (Brief and Gardiner, 2021; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015).

The SSTEWS scale can also assist staff in setting development and guide self-assessment procedures. Similar to the SSTEWS scale the ECERS-E has a seven-point scoring system, although the main objective is to assess the quality by collecting data from staff interviews, curriculum planning and classroom observations (Kingston and Siraj, 2015).

Moreover, the SSTEWS scale is supported by Vygotsky, 1979 theory of the zone of proximal development which was developed by Vygotsky in response to criticism of psychometric testing that just assessed present ability rather than developmental potential. Vygotsky, 1979 maintained that to identify developing talents, evaluation should be collaborative (McLeod, 2024; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015).

However, research by Brunsek *et al.* (2017), cited in Iles (2019) shows that the quality assurance method ECERS frequently focuses disproportionately on one component within education and care contexts, leading to a restricted evaluation of quality service. The primary emphasis of the ECERS is the learning environment, it does not consider children's judgments of the quality of the programme they are getting or the consequent evaluation score.

The research also notes that ECERS does not take into account wider developmental outcomes such as social and emotional development, as does the SSTEWS scale (Brief and Gardiner, 2021; Iles, 2019). As stated by Howard *et al.* (2018) SSTEWS was created to supplement and expand upon the current environment rating scales.

As pointed out by Siraj *et al.* (2015) the SSTEWS scale and ECERS-E have a similar scoring ranging from 1 to 7, with 1 being sufficient and 7 being exceptional. Observations will always begin with a rating scale of 1 and progress upwards. The total mean score of the scales is calculated by summing all item ratings and dividing by the total number of items assessed. The rating scale scores must reflect observed practice rather than what they are told. Using the SSTEWS scales requires a thorough comprehension of what is being observed (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015).

Hoare (n.d.) points out that before utilising the scale to measure quality in the early years you should have a solid understanding of early childhood practice, cultural sensitivity, and child development.

According to Welsh Government (2014), the Social Services and Wellbeing Wales Act of 2014 supports the SSTEWS rating scale and aims to support children between the ages of two and five to develop skills in relationships, effective communication, self-regulation, sustained shared thinking, and emotional well-being. The CIW's quality of care evaluation and joint inspection system places a strong emphasis on the value of wellbeing (Estyn, 2019). Siraj *et al.* (2015) emphasise how having the ability to think deeply with children is an important skill for fostering their socio-emotional and cognitive development.

As stated by Social Care Wales (2022) the quality of care review in any regulated service should be part of quality improvement. The 2016 legislation prioritises service quality and improvement enhancing protection for individuals in need while also guaranteeing services to provide high-quality care.

Furthermore, high-quality interactions, defined as those that encourage and expand children's thinking, are increasingly being connected to children's socio-emotional and cognitive development outcomes (Tonge, Jones and Okely, 2018; Zoggeler-Burkhardt *et al.*, 2023). Howard *et al.* (2018) emphasize the importance of sustained shared thinking for young children as it enhances the children's language and thinking skills.

It is evident from Taggart *et al.* (2015) that the SSTEWS scale encourages developmentally appropriate early childhood practices and is also a response to research that acknowledges new ideas and concepts regarding successful practice.

Moreover, as SSTEWS is relatively a new tool for assessing quality assurance, Howard *et al.* (2018) propose that more research is necessary to determine the validity of the scale. Although Howard *et al.* (2018) states the SSTEWS model has proven to have good dependability and prediction accuracy concerning child development. Similarly, it has been shown that ECERS-E is a reliable and powerful predictor of children's development at the time of school entry (Howard *et al.*, 2018). The differences between the two rating scales are the learning and development domains and the topic knowledge content covered by each of the scale's subscales. Though learning cannot be separated into distinct areas of practice due to its intrinsic interconnectedness, there are evident differences in the subscales focuses (Howard *et al.*, 2018).

To conclude the SSTEWS scale was created to help identify, promote, and improve high-quality interactions in early childhood education settings (Siraj *et al.* 2015). It was created to aid researchers, educators, and outside quality assurance staff in evaluating early encounters, including pedagogical and practical elements, and to foster professional growth by highlighting areas that needed work and identifying strong regions (Howard *et al.*, 2018).

Similarly, the ECERS-E seeks to measure curricular quality in areas such as mathematical, scientific, and literacy learning, as well as diversity. These tools have a worldwide reputation for measuring essential components of ECEC quality (Siraj *et al.*, 2019).

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