



ECEY6011 Leadership and Management for Systems of Quality

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Basic Acknowledgement format of AI tool use:

I acknowledge the use of AI Tool throughout this study

I used the prompt(s):

1. Co-pilot, Google to find resources.
2. Co-pilot to summarise articles
3. Grammarly to check spelling and grammar, along with plagiarism.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI-generated text as my own work.

I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Part 2 What is Quality?

Introduction

The concept of 'quality' in early years is widely discussed but remains difficult to define, with no universally agreed definition across policy, research and practice. However, high-quality provision is widely recognised as essential for giving children the best possible start in life. The Welsh Government (2023a) *Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Quality framework* defines high-quality provision as a child-centred, rights-based approach grounded in holistic, reflective, evidence-based practice, and this aligns with international research identifying early childhood as a critical period in which high-quality provision is a key determinant of later-life outcomes (Hall *et al.*, 2013; Taggart *et al.*, 2015; OECD, 2018; Bucelli and McKnight, 2022).

However, the relationship between childcare quality and long-term outcomes is complex, influenced by type and duration of provision, funding, workforce capacity, socioeconomic background, and home environment (Melhuish *et al.*, 2015; Hart *et al.*, 2023; OECD, 2025). The broad Welsh framework adds complexity, making quality difficult to measure and implement consistently. The Welsh Government (Alma Economics, 2024) report highlights ambiguity in operationalising quality, using terms like "good quality" and "high quality" interchangeably. These inconsistencies may create tensions between policy aspirations and practical delivery, especially given constraints on affordability, workforce capability, and variation across provision (Lewis and West, 2017; Herbst, 2025).

Eadie *et al.* (2024) conceptualise quality as complex and multidimensional, encompassing structural, process, and systems dimensions, shaped by the perspectives of policymakers, practitioners, parents, and children. In Wales, bodies such as Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn frame quality around standards, outcomes, and accountability, whereas UNICEF emphasise children's rights, well-being, and holistic development (United Nations, 1989). These varied perspectives complicate consistent definition and measurement, reinforcing that quality is socially and culturally constructed.

Quality is commonly divided into structural, process, and systems components. Structural quality refers to measurable features such as staff-to-child ratios,

practitioner qualifications, resources, and the physical environment. In contrast, process quality relates to children's lived experiences, including interactions, emotional warmth, and opportunities for play and learning (Edwards, 2021; Sluiter, Fukkink and Fekkes, 2025). Systems quality, covers governance, funding, policy and inspection. These dimensions are highly interdependent. For example, improved structural quality (e.g., lower ratios, professional development) may support process quality through more meaningful interactions, but this depends on sufficient investment at the systems level.

The importance of high-quality early years provision is clear from evidence on early childhood development. The first five years are a critical period for brain development, establishing foundations for future learning, behaviour, and health (Thompson, 2001; Tierney and Nelson, 2009; Early Years Coalition, 2021). High-quality provision can support cognitive development, including language acquisition and early literacy, as well as social and emotional skills such as self-regulation and resilience (Vasseleu *et al.*, 2022; Horm *et al.*, 2024). Conversely, low-quality provision may hinder development through limited stimulation or inconsistent care (Côté *et al.*, 2013; Araujo, Dormal and Schady, 2019). Longitudinal research, including the EPPE study, demonstrates that children who attend high-quality settings achieve better outcomes, both in the short and long term (Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

In addition to supporting development, access to high-quality childcare also helps reduce inequalities. Research suggests that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit particularly from high-quality early years provision (Hynes and Habasevich-Brooks, 2008; The Sutton Trust, 2024; OECD, 2025). Highlighting how provision can help narrow attainment gaps through enriched learning environments and supportive relationships not always available at home. As a result, in Wales, this understanding has informed policy initiatives such as Flying Start, which aim to increase access to quality provision for disadvantaged families (Welsh Government, 2026).

Despite these benefits, determining and measuring "high quality" remains challenging. In Wales, quality is evaluated through inspection, regulatory oversight of minimum standards by Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn. Although these

approaches provide structured benchmarks, they have been criticised for prioritising measurable aspects of provision over less tangible elements, such as children's emotional experiences and culturally responsive practice (Urban *et al.*, 2012; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013). This pressure to meet inspection criteria, in turn, may shift focus towards compliance rather than on responsiveness to individual needs.

Further complicating the discussion, it is importance to acknowledge broader critiques of quality. Some researchers argue that definitions of quality, often grounded in Western perspectives on childhood, may not be universally applicable (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013). Moreover, the connection between childcare quality and child outcomes is inconsistent, as home learning environments and family context can be equally or more influential (Melhuish *et al.*, 2015). Although many studies show positive links between high-quality provision and developmental outcomes, results are mixed, and effect sizes vary. Together, these debates underscore the key argument: quality should be understood as a dynamic, evolving process, not as a fixed set of standards. This encompasses measurable indicators, children's lived experiences, and the wider ethos of provision.

Reflection on Environmental Rating Scales

While statutory frameworks such as the National Minimum Standards establish essential requirements for safety, staffing ratios, safeguarding, and consistency, within the Welsh context, these standards are intended to ensure baseline compliance and serve as a foundation starting point for policy and practice, forming the minimum benchmark rather than being regarded as a comprehensive measure of quality in early years provision (Welsh Government, 2023b; Clifton, 2024).

Therefore, additional quality assurance methods are necessary to promote continuous improvement and excellence in practice, such as the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms and Clifford, 1982; Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998; 2005) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale (SSTEW) (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). The use of such tools provides a more detailed and developmental understanding of quality, enabling settings to move beyond compliance towards reflective and evidence-informed practice.

This section critically examines how quality assurance tools extend beyond statutory requirements by comparing their strengths and limitations. It then evaluates the extent to which each tool supports improvements in childcare provision, providing a structured analysis of their combined contribution to quality enhancement.

ECERS is a widely used international quality assurance tool evaluating provision for children 3-5 across domains, including space, resources, language and literacy, learning activities, care routines and programme structure (Vermeer *et al.*, 2016; Garvis *et al.*, 2018). A key strength of ECERS is its ability to assess multiple dimensions of quality, incorporating both structural and process elements, and aligning with the views of theorists Piaget and Bronfenbrenner on how the environment influences child development. (Hargraves, 2021; Guy-Evans, 2025)

Research suggests that higher ECERS scores are associated with aspects of provision that may support literacy, language development, and school readiness (Sylva *et al.*, 2004, 2006; Anders *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, ECERS has been linked to social outcomes, such as improved communication skills and reduced behavioural challenges (Brunsek *et al.*, 2017; Manning *et al.*, 2017). This indicates the scale captures developmentally relevant aspects of provision. Specifically, ECERS provide measurable data on the quality of the learning environment, resources and routines, enabling practitioners to identify strengths and gaps in structured provision.

ECERS promotes quality beyond statutory requirements by focusing on the learning environment rather than compliance. For example, while minimum standards may require a setting to be safe and adequately resourced, ECERS evaluates the quality, accessibility and appropriateness of those resources for children's development. This encourages settings to enhance their provision and move towards higher levels of quality.

However, ECERS is not without limitations. One criticism highlights an inconsistency between ECERS scores and children's outcomes: some report positive child outcomes, while others report limited or no improvement beyond certain scores that do not translate into continued developmental gains (Early *et al.*, 2018; Harding, Nguyen and Aikens, 2025; Alpys and Hernández-Torrano, 2026).

Another limitation is emphasises on environmental factors, potentially leading to surface-level assessments (Cassidy *et al.*, 2005; Douglas, 2005). This suggests it

may overlook deeper pedagogical interactions, risking a 'tick box' approach to quality improvement (Simpson, 2020; Sethuraman, 2026). There is potential for this tool to be used in a compliance-driven manner, similar to statutory standards, if not applied critically, especially when reliant on funding, such as Flying Start.

More recent research has also raised concerns regarding equity and cultural validity within ECERS. A report by Yazejian and Iruka (2024) highlights that factors such as race, ethnicity, cultural context and socioeconomic resources can significantly influence ECERS scores, suggesting that the tool may not operate as a neutral or universally applicable measure of quality. For example, settings with children from diverse cultural or lower socioeconomic backgrounds receive lower scores, not necessarily due to poorer practice but because of differing norms or access to resources. This reinforces criticisms that ECERS may reflect dominant cultural assumptions about quality rather than recognising diverse approaches to early childhood education, and excludes some stakeholders (Tanner, Welsh and Lewis, 2006).

In contrast, SSTEWE was developed to address limitations of earlier tools, such as ECERS, particularly the lack of focus on interactions between practitioners and children, aimed at children aged 2 to 5 years. SSTEWE emphasises sustained shared thinking, emotional well-being, and practitioners-child interactions (Siraj *et al.*, 2015). These aspects are widely recognised as central to high-quality early years provision and are strongly associated with improved cognitive and social outcomes for children (Bowlby, 1969;1988; Hamre and Pianta, 2001). By focusing on practitioners-child interactions, SSTEWE promotes a deeper understanding of quality beyond environmental factors, supporting thinking, language and emotional well-being (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2021; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023).

A key strength of SSTEWE is its focus on process quality, particularly in how practitioners support children's thinking, language development, and emotional well-being (Brodie, 2024; Huang, 2024). This represents a significant extension beyond statutory requirements, which do not typically assess the depth of quality interactions (Spencer and Dubiel, 2013; Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2015).

Research suggests that engagement in reflective practice and intentional teaching develops a more nuanced and holistic understanding of pedagogy (Leggett, 2025).

SSTEW reinforces this by prioritising the quality of adult-child interactions as central to effective provision (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015).

Despite these strengths, SSTEW also has its limitations. The assessment of interactions is inherently more subjective than the evaluation of environmental factors, relying on observers' judgments, which may affect reliability depending on their training and expertise (Virk *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, implementing SSTEW requires skilled practitioners who can interpret and apply its principles effectively (Howard *et al.*, 2018). In settings where staff may lack training or experience, the tool's impact may be limited (Alver Valley Schools, 2025). Furthermore, the observation process and evaluation can be time-consuming, making it challenging to implement consistently in practice (Purdon, 2016).

When comparing ECERS and SSTEW, it is evident that both tools provide valuable but distinctive insights into quality. ECERS focuses on the structure of the childcare environment, making it relatively straightforward to measure and implement. In contrast, SSTEW focuses on process quality and pedagogical interactions that underpin children's learning. While ECERS may be more objective and standardised, SSTEW is more interpretive and reflective. This suggests the tools are complementary: ECERS addresses structure, while SSTEW focusing on process quality, meaning neither alone provides a comprehensive evaluation (Howard *et al.*, 2018; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018).

Both tools support self-evaluation, accountability, and professional development, but may encourage compliance driven practice where high scores are prioritised over meaningful reflection. Additionally, neither tool fully captures the complexity of children's experiences, including individual needs, cultural context, and long-term developmental outcomes. For example, they do not fully account for children's perspectives, cultural differences, or the influence of home learning environment on development.

Improving provision requires consideration of children's development, interactions, practitioner effectiveness, and family perspectives. While ECERS and SSTEW provide valuable insight, they do not capture cultural context, and long-term outcomes (Wishard *et al.*, 2003; Yazejian and Iruka, 2024).

Despite these limitations, both tools can play an important role in driving quality improvement when used effectively. Research indicates that ECERS has been used to inform policy development, workforce training and quality improvement initiatives across a range of contexts (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018; 2021; Dallimore, 2019; Welsh Government, 2023a)

They provide benchmarks that extend beyond statutory requirements and encourage settings to aspire towards higher levels of practice. In this way, the tools drive quality by translating abstract concepts into observable criteria, supporting targeted improvements in practice, staff development, and provision planning.

By identifying strengths and areas for development, the tools inform staff training, support reflective practice, and guide improvements in both environment and interactions. However, it is essential that these tools are triangulated as part of a broader quality assurance approach, rather than as standalone measures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, quality in early years provision is complex, multidimensional, and shaped by a range of structural, process, and contextual factors. While statutory frameworks establish essential baseline standards, they are insufficient alone to capture the full depth of children's experiences or to drive excellence in practice. Tools such as ECERS and SSTEWS extend beyond these minimum requirements by offering structured approaches to evaluating both environments and interactions. However, each has limitations, particularly in relation to subjectivity, cultural validity, and the risk of compliance-driven use. Their greatest value lies in their combined and reflective application as part of a broader, holistic approach to quality assurance, requiring ongoing critical reflection, responsiveness to context, and a commitment to prioritising children's lived experiences alongside measurable indicators, while continually striving for high-quality provision.

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