

Reflective paper

Bertram and Pascal (2006) describe quality as a presupposed and subjective concept with powerful aspects. However, the quality in staff becomes great importance to achieve high-quality provision. Quality is assessed by individual views, settings, space requirements and time management. Similarly, Maldonado-Carreño *et al.* (2022) defined quality as a technique individuals apply when continuously achieving therefore, aim to exceed current national minimum standards. The quality of the setting allows individuals to recognise if it is a suitable setting for supporting children's development, continuous reflection upon the quality of the setting allows identification of any improvements that can be made. The Foundation Years (no date) stated the quality of the provision has a consistent influence on the child's learning experiences as well as their future outcomes. Additionally, Robb (2022) described quality improvement as a sequence of persistence, consistently self-observing, recognising areas of strength as well as improvements, and reflecting on those plans through implementation, evaluating results and any impact on practice.

However, Cottle and Alexander (2012) stated the term quality has been in debate nationally, in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services for many years as stakeholders' perspectives conclude a broad interpretation of quality. Similarly, Mathers, Singler, and Karemaker (2012) mentioned the term 'quality' and how it is recognised is determined by stakeholders' roles within the Early Years (EY), this means there can be multiple interpretations of what is meant by 'quality'. A more recent source, Moss (2016) concludes that quality is more of a choice rather than a necessity, however, states it is found to be a challenging term to define. Although the National Minimum Standards (NMS) and expectations are provided for non-maintained settings, the Welsh Government (2016) recommended childcare providers to act in accordance with each section of the NMS but also continue to seek in areas for refinement and beyond NMS to provide continuous and ever developing quality assurance and improvements.

PACEY (2018) believed the existence of a high-quality setting and childcare provision has great importance in providing adequate support and encouragement to the children and their families, which is a core principle during implementation for

stakeholders. Similarly, Royal Charter (2022) described that the parents and children are the most valuable group of stakeholders in the education sector. Children's views are often bypassed when it comes to practice, therefore, in line with Article 12 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2017), children have the right to have their voice and feelings heard and acted upon. In addition, the educational leaders should also consider the importance of the voice of their employees to drive quality provision. Furthermore, Early Years Careers (2016) believed settings of high quality have a substantial impact on allowing children to reach their full potential. Moreover, evidence shown from The Foundation Years (no date) highlighted the need for childcare providers in the EY to acknowledge effective strategies in provision, to ensure experiential learning environments are accessible to promote holistic abilities, progressing along developmental pathways (Welsh Government, 2021).

In effect, non-maintained settings are built like a pyramid, adopting the process of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Pichère, 2015) whereby effective keyworkers are required to build positive relationships with children, provide a quality provision for children to reach the point of self-actualisation. The Welsh Government (2016) emphasised without an effective leader, the employees lack enthusiasm and motivation. This can fail to meet the children's holistic needs and NMS of CIW. Children within a high-quality provision thrive with an effective workforce, actively working together as a team and engage with the child's family (The Foundation Years, no date).

Conversely, Ho, Campbell-Barr, and Leeson (2010) discuss there is a continuous search for high quality improvement in educational settings, in many countries. However, the provision must consist of keyworkers that fully understand the settings pedagogy and the importance of correct implementation, to support children's development thoroughly. For professionals to understand the importance of high-quality practice, observations can be carried out by the educational leader through quality assurance tools, to track progression (OECD, 2022).

UNICEF (2014) states measuring quality in ECEC is most effective when using observations. This strategy is referred to as a central contribution to quality assurance,

allowing the setting to identify if they are reaching the CIW's NMS, as well as aiming to overachieve in each section of standards (Welsh Government, 2016). However, Moss (2016) expressed that measuring quality as a challenging task due to it being a hard, inconsistent, and subjective area to define. This section will focus on two types of quality measures.

The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project identified high-quality in interactions, incorporating Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) which has a significant impact on the quality of a setting (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002). However, Iles (2019) research suggests that various practices that adopt the SST aspect in learning, within ECEC are substandard. Therefore, in unpredictable circumstances from practice and research, the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWS) Scale was established with underpinnings from the REPEY project, as a tool to assess quality assurance.

The SSTEWS Scale is a quality assurance tool completed through observations to assess theory and practice in ECEC settings (Siraj *et al.* 2015). Additionally, Melhuish, Siraj and Kingston (2015) state the SSTEWS scale focuses closely on observations in high-quality interactions amongst children's learning through teamwork as well as with keyworkers, and how keyworkers respond to the child-adult interactions. Furthermore, research from an Australian study suggested through findings that the SSTEWS scale requires strong partnerships between the keyworkers and stakeholders to provide collaborative support for the children (Siraj *et al.* 2019). This means that interactions promote SST, where two or more individuals support each other's thinking and understanding, intellectually to solve problems (Mackenzie, 2016). In addition, practitioners are then able to encourage children's language acquisition, enhancing their social and emotional well-being and thinking skills. In correspondence, Siraj-Blatchford (2002) highlights the importance of SST in enhancing children's thinking skills and wellbeing development.

Conversely, the SSTEWS scales results consistently rely on the practitioners' interest and motivation in the children's learning. For the SSTEWS scale to provide effective results due to being an observational tool, practitioners should ensure they are providing the children with their full attention, whilst encouraging the children to

intellectually extend their thinking (Siraj *et al.* 2015). Additionally, Howard *et al.* (2018) states to use this quality measuring tool effectively, staff must require training to fully understand the statements within each sub-scale. This suggests for professionals to use the SSTEWS scale within their setting, practitioners must be experienced and knowledgeable on how to implement the method during observations. Similarly, Kingston and Siraj (2015) state that to effectively engage in SST, positive relationships must be of high importance to understand the children.

In effect, Melhuish and Gardiner (2018) highlight those observational findings from the SSTEWS scale are then used to assess the quality provision in the ECEC setting overall, across the five sub-scales; *building trust, confidence and independence, supporting and extending language and communication, supporting emotional well-being, supporting learning and critical thinking and assessing learning and language*. Similarly, Hoare (no date) suggest that the scale focuses on pedagogy, and how it is implemented by the staff to support the children's early development and learning. This means that observational findings show the effectiveness of the quality provision, the quality in the role of professionals, and any recommendations in areas for improvement, to achieve a more successful provision. For example, the first scale, *building trust, confidence and independence* supports the effectiveness of the SSTEWS scale tool to achieve high quality provision by ensuring the items within each sub-scale are up to date and in line with the New Curriculum for Wales in Non-Maintained Settings 2022 (Welsh Government, 2021). This enhances the children's development as the SSTEWS scale can support practitioners to identify if they are meeting the children's needs, as well as in areas that may require additional interactions and support through encouragement and the more knowledgeable other (MKO) to improve the quality of practice in line with Vygotsky's (1934) theory, zone proximal development (Morin, 2012).

While the SSTEWS scale acknowledges there are significant progressions in children's development between the ages of 2 to 6 years, the SSTEWS scale primarily monitors the effectiveness of practice and staff that stimulate and support the children between the ages of 2 and 6 years in an educational environment that is suitably adapted to their needs (Melhuish, 2016). Nevertheless, the SSTEWS scale has been established from the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) to support practitioners and professionals

of higher level in assessing children's thinking and emotional wellbeing through early interactions. Although there has been very little evidence of limitations with the subjective SSTEWS scale, evidence from Howard *et al.* (2018) has shown that there have been significant strengths to assessing children's developmental progression using this quality measure tool. This source further reported that however, the SSTEWS scale is still the most recent published tool for measuring quality, therefore, suggests that it would be beneficial to investigate the tool further, on more than one account, with the same child to ensure validity and accuracy in the fourteen statements within the five sub-scales.

The ERS' are found to have a similar scoring framework to the SSTEWS scale (Kingston and Siraj, 2015). The second tool of quality assurance to be discussed is an additional most common system used for measuring quality.

Professionals who use the ERS as a quality assurance method are subjected to answer statements with yes or no indicators over a period of three hours, to obtain an overall score and rating of quality in practice (Massachusetts, 2022). PA Keys (no date) define the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS) which was recently revised (Gordon *et al.*, 2013), as a quality assessment tool used in settings, aimed at children from aged birth to three years. The foundation of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales – Revised (ECERS-R) assessment is structured by including forty-three statements shared between the seven environmental subscales. This suggests only focusing on children under the age of three years, will provide more accuracy in the forty-three statements, compared to up to the age of six years where the forty-three statements would likely become broader, finding it more difficult to identify achievements in observations.

To assess the quality of provision, like the SSTEWS scale, ECERS-R was promoted for practitioners to evaluate the effectiveness of their practice by collecting data through observations and interviews with staff. Furthermore, (Neitzel *et al.*, 2019) states that the ERS measure quality with an inclusive range of developmental needs. Research about the ECERS-R suggests that the quality assurance tool provides validity and reliable findings from observing children through play and questioning the keyworkers. However, it does not provide sufficient and factual evidence that it improves a child's

development. Similarly, Kingston and Siraj (2015) highlight studies have shown the ERS are reliable when completed effectively, relating to children's intellectual and social-emotional development.

A dated research study, but relevant to research topic shows the ECERS-R was trialled to ensure effectiveness for managers and keyworkers in day care settings, in eight childcare rooms from four early learning organisations. The scores of quality levels in provision prior to using the measurement tool as well as the after using the tool were compared to monitor quality. The findings from comparison discovered drastic improvements in all seven sub-scales. Therefore, concluded that the ECERS-R should be used as an effective tool to monitor and identify improvements in the quality of provision in nurseries (Warash, Markstrom, and Lucci, 2005).

However, a more recent source states, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) longitudinal study demonstrates that in effective settings, there are indications that professionals consider assessing the development and practice, holistically to ensure that children's movement in learning and the environment correspond to achieve educational outcomes (Kingston and Siraj, 2015). Additionally, Setodji, Schaack, and Le (2018) believe that although the ECERS-R is used in many early childhood settings and the validity of quality can be evident in the method, the validity in the child's outcomes are not well entrenched. This means that managers implementing the ECERS-R correctly can provide authentic and factual evidence for the setting to move forward, work on any improvements as a team, supporting continuous professional development (CPD) and monitor the child's developmental progression.

Nevertheless, despite their similarities, Neitzel *et al.* (2019) states that the ECERS third edition (ECERS-3) provided more focus on the role of the keyworkers within provision, supporting specific domains in children's development, such as cognitive and social skills. In equivalence to the STEW scale, additional items were included in the sub-scales to enhance the significance of high-quality adult-child interactions as well as the effectiveness of keyworkers teaching in pedagogy and practice. This shows that although both ERS are equally as important in measuring quality in practice, ECERS-3 has specifically emphasised on the role of the professionals more closely,

highlighting the importance of effective practitioners in order for the child to succeed in their developmental progression.

Overall, Vermeer *et al.* (2016) demonstrates that the ERS are foundations to assessing the structural and process aspects which underpin quality. Furthermore, Howard *et al.* (2018) evaluates that the ERS have been accepted internationally as a fair test to observe and obtain valuable information. Moreover, the process aspect is seen as the most effective however, this does not disregard that the structural aspect has important aspects during observation. The source further states that the ability as staff and the qualifications obtained enhance the observational skills whilst using the current Curriculum for Wales 2022 (Welsh Government, 2021) to support monitoring and tracking the progress of each individual child and the CPD of keyworkers. This means that ERS observations are carried out in a more structured format rather than being subjective to the observer like the STEW scale. Equally, the interactions between all stakeholders proves more importance rather than areas in the setting when determining children's outcomes.

In comparison, both quality measurement tools provide a more positive outlook towards their scales, accessing validity in findings, rather than limitations. According to Tayler (2015), children experience substantial growth development in the first years of their life. Therefore, providing them with a high-quality start in life will support the child's developmental journey. This illustrates the importance of management in the ECEC settings and keyworkers to provide effective and high-quality learning environments with effective partnerships to promote SST, measuring practice and pedagogy through quality measuring tools successfully.

To summarise, although the definition of quality has been a very subjective term by many sources, it has been discussed, highlighting the importance of obtaining a high-quality setting when following pedagogy to promote children's holistic development. To assess the effectiveness of an early childhood setting, two quality assurance methods have been analysed, the STEW scale and the ERS, identifying the positives as well as limitations when using the quality measuring tools. It has been identified that although both scales have their differences in how they measure quality for example, the ECERS-R focuses on observations and staff interviews compared to the

ECERS-3 and the SSTEWS scale which emphasis on the role of the professionals supporting the child's thinking and development through SST, they also have similarities in how they obtain the findings such as, observations. Additionally, to use both quality measuring tools within an ECEC setting in the future, it is clear to understand upon reflection that the professional must have a broad knowledge and understanding from training on how to implement and complete the observational tool, to provide authentic findings for the setting as whole to reflect upon, acknowledging what is successful and what may need to be improved to accomplish a high quality provision for all children's learning as well as the staff.

As an EY practitioner, studying quality and how to measure high-quality provision with tools, including the Quality of Care report has enhanced my understanding on the severity of the knowledge and understanding required to ensure the provision and practice is effectively meeting the children needs. For future practice, I am aware that positive relationships are paramount before completing any assessments to ensure that I confidently know the child's needs and abilities through independent observations and effective communication with the parents and other staff members in the setting. This will effectively enhance my continuous professional development and my effectiveness as a practitioner in practice.

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