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ECEY6011

Leadership and Management for Systems of Quality

Cover sheet

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Page 2: AI acknowledgment

Page 3: Section 1: Evaluating Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Critical Analysis of ECERS-3 and SSTEW in Practice

Page 10: Reference list

AI Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the use of Grammarly (<https://www.grammarly.com/>) on multiple dates throughout the assignment to check my work using the prompts:

1. Check the text for readability, grammar, and syntax.

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 as evidence.

I acknowledge the use of Copilot (<https://www.microsoftcopilot.com>) on multiple dates throughout the assignment using prompts such as:

1. Find and summarise academic journal articles dated within the past 10 years on the importance of quality assurance methods in early years settings.

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 as evidence.

Section 1:

Evaluating Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Critical Analysis of ECERS-3 and SSTEW in Practice

Quality in early childhood education and care is a complex and multidimensional concept, shaped by interacting structural and process features rather than a single measurable element (OECD, 2018; Slot, 2018). Research shows that quality encompasses the conditions, interactions and outcomes that influence children's development and long-term learning trajectories (Burchinal, 2018; Melhuish *et al.*, 2015). These understandings are informed by theoretical perspectives such as ecological systems theory, which emphasises the influence of environments and relationships on children's behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and pedagogical research highlighting the importance of high-quality interactions (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004). Another perspective is Laevers' (1994) Experiential Education theory, which positions children's wellbeing and involvement as core indicators of deep-level learning. Laevers argues that emotionally secure, stimulating and responsive environments enable children to engage meaningfully, linking closely to contemporary understandings of process quality and the relational climate stressed in Welsh policy.

In Wales, conceptions of quality are shaped by national policy framework, including the *Curriculum for Wales*, which promotes holistic, child-centred and rights-based practice (Welsh Government (WG), 2022), the aims of Flying Start, which emphasise reducing inequalities through access to high-quality early years provision (WG, 2021) and the regulatory expectations set by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), which define quality across the four domains of care, environment, leadership and wellbeing (CIW, 2023). Collectively, these frameworks recognise that high-quality provision is essential for supporting children's rights, wellbeing and long-term outcomes (UNCRC, 1989; Sylva *et al.*, 2010; Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

However, a widely used way of conceptualising quality is through the distinction between structural, process and outcome quality, as outlined by Slot (2018) and further supported by Burchinal (2018). Structural quality refers to the conditions that support effective provision, such as staff qualifications, ratios, cohort size, physical environment and regulatory compliance, which Vermeer *et al.* (2016) identify as

necessary but insufficient for high-quality practice. In Wales, these elements are embedded within the National Minimum Standards (NMS) and monitored by CIW, which ensures that settings meet essential requirements for safety, staffing and organisation (WG, 2023a; CIW, 2023).

Although structural quality creates conditions in which high-quality interactions can occur, it does not guarantee meaningful learning experiences. Research by Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) and Sylva *et al.* (2010) demonstrates that process quality, particularly the quality of adult and child interactions, is far more influential in shaping developmental outcomes. This distinction is important because it highlights that compliance with statutory requirements represents only a baseline, not the full picture of what children need for rich, developmentally meaningful experiences (Slot, 2018; WG, 2023a).

Process quality, by contrast, focuses on children's lived experiences. This includes the quality of relationships, emotional climate, interactions and the responsiveness of practitioners to children's needs and interests. Research consistently highlights that process quality is the strongest predictor of positive child outcomes. For example, Cadima *et al.* (2023) highlight that warm, attuned practitioner and child exchanges and instructional interactions are central to high-quality toddler provision across European contexts, while Setodji, Schaack and Le (2018) caution that commonly used quality assessment tools often fail to capture these relational and interactional dimensions, despite their importance for children's development. This aligns the Welsh Government's Quality Framework, which positions relationships, interactions and children's voices at the heart of high-quality provisions (WG, 2023b). Similarly, CIW's inspection guidance foregrounds the importance of emotionally secure, responsive practice (CIW, 2023).

This policy emphasis is strongly supported by empirical research. Although the EPPE study (Sylva *et al.*, 2004) remains a landmark example, demonstrating that warm, sustained interactions, shared thinking and skilled practitioner engagement were key drivers of children's cognitive and social development. Further evidence comes from Slot *et al.* (2015), who demonstrated that emotional and instructional interactions were far more influential on children's development than structural

features alone, reinforcing that quality emerges through relational and pedagogical richness of daily practice rather than through compliance or paperwork.

Furthermore, outcome quality refers to the impact of provisions on children's development, wellbeing and learning. Outcomes may be immediate, such as emotional security, communication skills or engagement, or long-term, including educational attainment and social development. The OECD Starting Strong reports (OECD, 2006; 2017) highlight that high-quality early years' provision contributes to improved life chances, reduced inequalities and stronger societal outcomes. This is supported by international evidence demonstrating that high-quality early education is associated with improved cognitive and social outcomes (Yoshikawa, Weiland and Brooks-Gunn, 2018), reduced inequalities and enhanced long-term life chances (van Huizen and Plantenga, 2018) and sustained benefits across educational, social and economic domains (Gorey, 2021). Global research stresses that nurturing, high-quality early childhood experiences are foundational for lifelong and societal wellbeing (Britto *et al.*, 2017). These findings collectively align with the Welsh Government's priorities, particularly within Flying Start (WG, 2021) and the *Curriculum for Wales* (WG, 2022), which positions high-quality early years experiences as central to children's rights (UNCRC, 1989) and long-term wellbeing (Sylva *et al.*, 2010).

While EPPE has been instrumental in showing why the quality of interactions matters, findings from EPPE, alongside the EPPSE study and the Perry Preschool Project, also show that high-quality early years provision can have lasting effects over time. These studies consistently show that children who attend high-quality early years provision experience better cognitive, social and emotional outcomes, with benefits that persist into adolescence and adulthood (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Sylva *et al.*, 2014; Schweinhart *et al.*, 2005). They also highlight the protective role of high-quality provision for children facing disadvantage, showing that rich, responsive and well-structured early experiences can narrow developmental gaps, strengthen school readiness and support more equitable life trajectories. Collectively, this evidence reinforces why quality remains a central concern for policymakers and inspectors, who rely on such findings to shape regulatory frameworks and ensure that early year's settings provide the conditions for children to thrive (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Sylva *et al.*, 2014; Schweinhart *et al.*, 2005).

In Wales, this evidence base underpins the national inspection and legislative landscape. CIW's four domain model ensures that children's wellbeing, relationships and daily lived experiences remain central to quality judgments (CIW, 2023), while the NMS establish the structural baseline required for safe and effective provision (WG, 2023a). These frameworks align with the *Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*, which commits Wales to creating a healthier, more equal and resilient society (WG, 2015). Additionally, high-quality early years provision directly contributes to these national wellbeing goals by promoting children's rights, reducing inequalities and supporting long term developmental outcomes.

Building on established evidence that high-quality early year's provision is foundational to children's development and wellbeing, it is necessary to examine how quality assurance tools substantively support settings in evaluating and enhancing their practice. Two tools that are commonly used for this purpose are the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-3) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale (SSTEW). Although both aim to strengthen practice, they reflect different dimensions of quality, grounded in different assumptions about what matters most in early learning and it is these differences that influence how useful each tool is in day-to-day practice and how well they align with Welsh policy priorities.

ECERS-3 primarily assesses structural and environmental quality, focusing on space, routines, resources, health and safety and the organisation of the learning environment (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2015). This makes it highly compatible with regulatory frameworks such as the NMS and CIW expectations, which foregrounds safe, well-organised provision (WG, 2023a; CIW, 2023). A strength of ECERS-3's is its clarity and standardisation: it provides a consistent framework that can be applied across settings, supporting monitoring, compliance and baseline quality checks.

However, research raises concerns about the validity and depth of ECERS-3 as a measure of children's lived experience. Early *et al.* (2018) found that ECERS-3 does not operate as a single coherent measure; instead, a four-factor model better represented the scale. Associations between ECERS-3 scores and children's developmental outcomes were small or non-significant, echoing evidence that structural indicators alone do not fully explain variations in children's learning

(Vermeer *et al.*, 2016; Slot, 2018). This suggests that while ECERS-3 may capture the conditions for quality, it does not necessarily reflect the quality of interactions or pedagogy that children experience day-to-day. This gap is particularly significant in Wales, where policy documents such as the *Curriculum for Wales: Early Years Guidance* (WG, 2022) and the *Quality Framework for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care* (WG, 2023b) emphasise relationships, responsive pedagogy and children's rights as central to quality.

Setodji, Schaak and Le (2018) further demonstrated that environmental rating scales often show a levelling-off effect, where improvements in environmental scores do not translate into better outcomes. This reinforces the argument that interactional quality is a stronger predictor of children's learning and wellbeing than environmental features alone. In practice, this means that settings may achieve high ECERS-3 scores without necessarily providing the rich, relational experiences that matter the most for development.

In contrast, SSTEWE was designed to capture process quality, focusing on sustained shared thinking, emotional well-being, sensitive pedagogy and the quality of adult and child interactions (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). These dimensions align closely with research in child development and neuroscience, which shows that early experiences shape the developing brain and that responsive, emotionally attuned interactions support learning, self-regulation and wellbeing (National Scientific Council of the Developing Child, 2007; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Tayler (2015) similarly argues that early learning is shaped by children's experiences, relationships and opportunities to develop as individuals, highlighting the importance of relational pedagogy.

There is empirical evidence that supports SSTEWE's focus on interactions. Howard *et al.* (2020) found that SSTEWE demonstrated a strong ability to predict children's language, numeracy and socio-behavioural development. This suggests that SSTEWE captures aspects of practice that are more intricately linked to children's outcomes than those measured by environmental rating scales. SSTEWE's strengths lie in its ability to illuminate the quality of pedagogy, emotional climate and shared thinking, elements that are often invisible in more checklist-driven tools. When combined with the neuroscience evidence and Welsh policy emphasis on

relationships and rights (Howard *et al.*, 2020; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; WG, 2022), SSTEWE offers a more holistic picture of the aspects of practice that matter the most for children's development.

However, SSTEWE is not without limitations. It is more interpretive and requires skilled observers who can make nuanced judgements about interactions. This can make it more time-intensive and potentially less consistent across assessors (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015; Slot, 2018). Unlike ECERS-3, which is highly standardised, SSTEWE relies on professional judgement and reflective dialogue, which may be challenging to implement at scale without substantial training. This raises considerations for Welsh settings, particularly smaller or rural providers, where access to training and professional development may be more limited.

When comparing the two tools, it becomes clear that ECERS-3 and SSTEWE offer complementary but incomplete perspectives. ECERS-3 is useful for identifying whether the basic conditions for quality are in place but its focus on the physical environment risks encouraging compliance-driven practice and performativity. Waters and MacDonald (2020) found that rating scales can lead practitioners to focus on scoring well rather than engaging deeply with pedagogy, a concern that is relevant when tools are used for inspection and accountability. This aligns with CIW's own recognition that quality cannot be reduced to environmental features alone (CIW, 2023).

SSTEWE, meanwhile, provides richer insight into the relational and pedagogical dimensions of quality but it is less suited to rapid monitoring and may be more challenging to use reliably without training (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). Its strengths lie in supporting reflective practice, professional dialogue and continuous improvement (Howard *et al.*, 2020), areas strongly aligned with Welsh Government priorities around relationships, wellbeing and child-centred pedagogy. This makes SSTEWE particularly compatible with the *Curriculum for Wales*' priorities on play, autonomy and responsive interactions (WG, 2022).

International evidence reinforces the importance of context-aware approaches to quality assessment. Ho, Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2010) argue that rating scale-based approaches cannot be transferred directly between countries because definitions of quality are shaped by sociocultural values and policy histories. In

Wales, where policy prioritises children's rights, relational pedagogy and wellbeing, a tool that foregrounds interactions, such as SSTEWS, may therefore be a better fit than one that prioritises environmental features. Economic evidence further strengthens this argument, with Spiebs (2013) showing that early childhood education delivers the strongest long-term benefits when provision itself is genuinely high-quality, reinforcing the need for tools that improve children's day-to-day experiences rather than simply driving compliance.

To conclude, high-quality early years provisions depend on the condition's children experience every day, particularly the relationships, interactions and emotional climate that shape their development. While ECERS-3 supports consistency and regulatory compliance, its focus on the environment means it cannot fully capture children's lived experiences. SSTEWS offers deeper insight into the relational and pedagogical aspects of practice that research and policy identify as the most influential, though it requires skilled observation. In practice, settings can exceed minimum standards by using these tools not only for compliance but as a basis for deepening reflective pedagogy, strengthening relationships and creating high-quality, responsive learning environments. Overall, settings benefit most from using both types of tools together: one to ensure the minimum standards are met and the other to illuminate the rich, responsive practice that enables children to thrive.

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