

The paper will investigate the meaning of quality, what quality looks like in the early years and will analyse scales that measure quality in childcare environments. Cambridge University press and assessment (2023) defines quality as looking at the features or characteristics of something to define whether it is good or bad. Tanner, Walsh and Lewis (2006) believe that quality has developed a common-sense status and is promoted through goals, targets and policy. Moreover, Cottle and Alexander (2012) states that there are multiple views and opinions of what quality is, these views are known to be influenced by government ideas of the nature of how they view quality. However, Tanner, Welsh and Lewis (2006) also state that the definition of quality in the early years has been confused for decades. Moreover, Woodhead (2000) and Penn (2011) relate to this and believe that this links back to the multiple different views that stakeholders have because they all have a different idea as to what they believe is an aspect of quality. Furthermore, Meade and cubey (2008) mentions that there are multiple citations of the word quality however it is rarely defined.

Quality is known to have been interlinked with early years to promote a growth in better management and society (power, 1997). Cambell-Barr and Leeson (2016) adds to this and mentions that quality is a known term used by early years educators and is used to help shape the view of what early years settings should look like. Moreover, Dahlberg and moss (2005) mention that there is a considerable amount of research that shows evidence that quality in the early years relates back to the psychology which allows practitioners to understand childhood development and learning and what is to be expected. Furthermore, Cambell-Barr and Leeson (2016) mention that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are most benefitted from good quality settings due to having positive experiences and interactions, meaning they are likely to have better outcomes as they grow older.

When looking at how quality is measured, Siraj-Blachford *et al* (2008) discusses the Effective provision of preschool education (EPPE) project which was the first large scaled European study that looked into the effects preschool education had on children, the project concluded that there are multiple ways of determining whether a setting is of high quality. Siraj-Blatchford *et al* (2008) used multiple quality rating scales alongside interviews and other methods of data and determined that high

interaction with children as well as sufficiently trained staff resulted in good quality care. In addition to this, Siraj-Blatchford *et al* (2002) discusses the researching effective pedagogy in the early years (REPEY) study which points out one of the key differences from good to excellent care, this is where practitioners extend the children's learning and development further during interactions between adults and children allowing children to join in with sustained shared thinking. Siraj-Blatchford *et al* (2017) extends on this and mentions that the adult involvement towards a child's learning encourages pedagogic strategies such as modelling and encouraging children's own learning, this goes in line with Vygotsky's belief in the co constructivist approach where adults are facilitators in improving children's quality of care (Daniels, 2017).

Howard *et al* (2018), Downer *et al* (2012) and Siraj *et al* (2017) states that research highlights the importance of high-quality interactions in order to support and extend children's development and understanding. The sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing (SSTEWS) scale was created after the evidence based REPEY study was undertaken to measure the quality of interactions within early years care and education. Sustained shared thinking is known as multiple individuals working together to problem solve, evaluate or extend an understanding (Siraj Blatchford *et al*, 2007). In addition to this, Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) and Moreno, Shwayder and Friedman (2015) mentions that the SSTEWS scale is known as the link to fill the gap between evidence and practice and relates back to effective pedagogy in the early years, it is underpinned by the principles of effective practice due to practitioners having close and affectionate relationships and interactions with children, this goes in line with Bowlby's attachment theory where children need bonds with others to avoid feeling threatened and unhappy (Holmes, 2006).

Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) mention that there are 5 subscales within the SSTEWS scale and these consist of building trust, assessing learning, supporting critical thinking, extending communication and looking at social and emotional wellbeing, these subscales have seven levels which rate from the lowest which is classed as inadequate to the highest rating being classed as excellent. However, Brodie (2015) questions the possibility of truly analysing quality in the few minutes the observations last for. Moreover, Fisher, Maritz and Lobo (2014) believe that scales can run a risk of individuals having different interpretations from what they

see, this means that the marks could vary depending on the person who carries out the assessment.

Howard *et al* (2018) mentions that the SSTEWS scale can identify the need for child centred learning to encourage progression and support children in being capable to self-regulate. The higher scores in the SSTEWS scale usually involve settings that are able to support children's interests, beliefs, confidence, risk taking and thinking (Howard *et al*, 2018). The SSTEWS scale is known as ensuring children's needs are being met emotionally, socially and cognitively (Howard *et al*, 2018 and Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). In relation to this, MacDonald, Gaely and Tinney (2019) Conducted a study regarding the SSTEWS scale and evaluated that the involvement of high-quality results in the SSTEWS scale related back to professional development of staff. When looking at this scale they discovered that settings that partook in training resulted in higher quality interactions, for example a setting that had been assessed with the SSTEWS scale before and after they had attended training showed a higher level of adult to child interaction afterwards resulting in a change in the practitioners behaviours which allowed the children to grow on their social, emotional and behavioural issues. However, this shows that settings may be negatively impacted with a bad reputation if practitioners do not have the ratios to cover staff to attend training in sustained shared thinking as they will receive lower rating scores from the SSTEWS scale (Macdonald, Tinney and Gealy, 2019).

One of the most popular systems to measure quality in childcare settings is the environment rating scales (ERS), these scales allow quality to be measured in babies, toddlers, children, adolescents and family environments (Neitzel *et al*, 2018 and Environment Rating Scales Institute, 2018). A similar scale that is set out similarly to the SSTEWS scale and is also known to have roughly the same findings is known as the early childhood environment rating scale (MacDonald, Tinney and Gealy, 2019 and Brodie, 2015). The ECER scale is a type of environment rating scale for the preschool setting which looks at things like the furniture, equipment and how the quality of the environment is affecting children's outcomes and the quality of social interactions (Siraj Blatchford *et al*, 2007 and Neitzel *et al*, 2019). Moreover, Kulikovskaya *et al* (2021) states that the idea of the ECERS scale relates back to Vygotsky ideas of social constructivism, the growth of a child's understanding and

knowledge relates back to interactions with others, relating back to the idea that the child is a competent and knowledgeable individual Cyrer, Harms and Riley (2003) mentions that the ECERS scale is divided into seven subscales consisting of space, care routines, activities, interaction, language, program structure and unlike the SSTEWS scales, parents are included into the scale. Moreover, West, Roberts and Noden (2010) believe that the SSTEWS scale goes against things such as policy makers that focus more on supporting parents and carers. However, Cyrer, Harms and Riley (2003) states that although the parent section is a subscale in the early childhood environment rating scale, lots of assessors do not score the parents' section due to parents not being there when they attend the settings.

In Similarity to the SSTEWS scale, Kulikovskaya *et al* (2021) mentions a study where the ECERS scale was used to improve interactions within the staff in a childcare environment, staff were introduced to the ECERS scale and trained to resolve conflict, allowing them to build upon the partnership and work ethic of staff, staff responded well to the new way of working in line with the ECERS scales and the level of quality increased. However, when thinking about training, Environment rating scales institute (2018) and pianta, La Paro and Hamre (2008) and Gordon *et al* (2013) state that it is a difficult task to train a large amount of people at once as it is known to take a long period of time to complete, this allows room for error due to researchers not being held accountable for the scores they provide. The timeliness of the training can also result in trainees not being told the importance of the exactness of the scale results as well as being provided with incorrect information resulting in the scale scores and child outcomes relationship being weakened (Environment rating institute, 2018).

Cyrer, Harms and Riley (2003) and Neitzel *et al* (2019) comments that the ECERS scale is delivered in the space of 3 hours where assessors answer multiple yes or no answers, staff are also asked questions about activities they offer in order to answer any questions that the observers were unable to fill out just by viewing the environment. Similarly to the SSTEWS scale, the first level of quality is rated as inadequate and the highest level is rated as excellent, however this scale has two extra levels of ratings in comparison to the SSTEWS scale. Brodie (2015) critiques the ECERS scale by mentioning that this way of assessing is known to be a time

consuming quality audit. Additionally, Gordon *et al* (2013) also questions the issue of time and mentions the struggles in ensuring adequate reliability and validity when looking at quality assurance.

When looking at both the STTEW scale and the ECER scale, although Tanner, Welsh and Lewis (2006) and Cottle and Alexander (2012) believe rating scales are valuable tools to access quality, they also mention that the known issue for quality rating scales relates back to outside agencies coming into access the quality of a setting as more of a universal understanding of quality which does not take into account the pedagogic strategies, ideas and values of the practitioners in the setting.

In conclusion, this paper indicates that there is a struggle to define the true meaning of quality because quality is interpreted in many different ways by many different individuals that work with children, for example stakeholders and staff (Cottle and Alexander, 2012), in order to try and help tackle this, two main projects (EEPE) and (REPEY) were created in aim to help practitioners understand the aspects of quality in childcare and what it looks like in the early years settings (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2002 and Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2008). Finally, the paper analysed two similarly structured scales that are used to measure quality, these were the Sustained shared thinking and emotional wellbeing scale and the Early childhood environment education scale, both showed the importance of high-quality child to adult interactions to ensure excellent quality. However, the scales also had the issue of things such as misinterpretations, reliability, validity and time.

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