

AI Cover Sheet

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Cover sheet

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Leadership of systems of quality: Reflection

Concept of quality

Quality is often defined as meeting or exceeding the needs and expectation of those receiving a service (Martin, Elg and Gremyr, 2020; De Giovanni, 2024). Additionally, it can also be understood as how well a service achieves and increases positive outcomes (Atkinson et al., 2010). Furthermore, quality in early years is linked to the ability of settings to support positive developmental outcomes through effective professional practice (OECD, 2018). This suggests that quality is not defined in one way but can include both meeting expectations and achieving effective outcomes. In early years practice this may refer to the standard of care, learning opportunities, and support provided to children within a setting and systems in place to continuously improve practice. However, Moss (2016) argues that the concept of quality can be an issue, as it is influenced by values and perspectives. This suggests that quality may be understood differently depending on the values and priorities of those defining it. This can be mitigated by considering multiple perspectives, including the views of children, families and practitioners, to ensure that quality reflects a wider range of experiences (Moss, 2016). According to Eadie et al. (2022) quality in early years is often understood through three main areas: structural, process and system quality. Structural quality refers to the policies and regulation within settings, including staff qualification, adult to child ratio and group sizes (Slot, 2018). Similarly, systems quality relates to wider policy and system level supports, such as funding and regulatory standards (Eadie et al., 2022). However, process quality focuses on the experiences children have within the setting, particularly the interactions between practitioners and children (Edwards, 2021). REPEY study highlights that high quality adult and child interaction is key to learning and development (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). This shows that quality in early years is influenced by both policy and regulations and the children's day to day experiences within an early year's setting.

Why quality is important

Quality is important in early years practice because it shapes how settings operate and supports the maintenance and improvement of standards across the sector (Palaiologou, 2023) a clear focus on quality is important as it helps to set clear professionals standards within early years setting. Suchodoletz et al. (2023) highlights that quality in early years is understood through structural and process elements, which reflect expected professional practices within setting. In Wales, quality is closely linked to regulation and accountability through Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), which is responsible for monitoring and inspecting early years settings. CIW uses quality frameworks to assess whether settings meet required standards and to identify areas for improvement, highlighting the role of quality in maintaining public confidence in early years provision (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2026; Welsh Government, 2024a). Similarly, quality is important in relation to legislation as early years setting must meet statutory requirements (Slot, 2018). Legal requirements are designed to safeguard children's welfare, promote inclusive practice, and ensure appropriate learning environments (Welsh Government, 2024a). This highlights that by prioritising quality, settings can demonstrate compliance with legislation and show that they can meet regulatory expectations. In contrast, Edwards (2021) highlights that quality should also be understood through relationships and experiences. This highlights that quality in early years setting is not only influenced by regulations but also by the daily practices and relationships that shapes children experiences. Overall, this suggests that quality is important because it influences the environment and experiences children are exposed to and consideration of both structural and interactions that occur in early years setting.

Importance of children access to high quality settings

A study by Rossbach et al. (2024) found that quality matters as children experience different learning opportunities depending on the quality of their learning environment. According to Welsh Government (2024b) high quality early years provision should be child centred and based on rights, ensuring that children's needs, interest and voice shape their experiences. This aligns with The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 12, 19, 24, 29 and 31 which emphasises children's right to be heard, protected from harm, supported in their health and development and able to play and participate freely to reach their

potential (UNICEF, 1989). This shows that access to high quality provision is important as it supports children's wellbeing, development and opportunities to learn through play. During the early years, children develop foundational skills that influence later learning (Brodie, 2018). This is supported by the EPPE and EPPSE study which found that high quality early years settings have long term benefits for children's learning (Sylva et al., 2004; Sylva et al., 2014).

However, research by Rossbach et al. (2024) shows that process quality varies across early years setting, meaning children experience different learning and developmental opportunities. To reduce variations in quality, effective quality assurance methods are required. These include regular inspection, self-evaluation, audits, and reflective practice to monitor standards. Ongoing professional development and clear regulatory frameworks support continuous improvement and help ensure more consistent, high-quality early years provision ((CSSIW, 2016a; CSSIW, 2016b). In practice the Quality-of-Care Review is used to reflect on practice, gather evidence and identify areas for improvement. It informs improvement plans and provides evidence for CIW inspections.

Critical analysis of two quality assurance tools

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is an observational tool used to assess the quality of learning environments in early years settings (Neitzel et al., 2019). ECERS-R, has been widely used in early years provision since its introduction in the 1990s and has informed quality assessment, inspection, and research in many settings (Neitzel et al., 2019; Gordon et al., 2015). ECERS-R rates quality on a scale from inadequate to excellent, based on structured observations of the setting and practice (Neitzel et al., 2019). This has made it a popular tool for providing a consistent and standardised way of judging quality across different early years environments. This links with the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare in Wales, which focus on safe, suitable environments, staffing and routines, areas that are also emphasised within ECERS-R. Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) uses these standards during inspection to judge whether settings meet minimum requirements Welsh Government (2023).

However, research has raised concerns about relying on ECERS-R as a sole measure of quality. Setodji, Schaack and Le (2018) highlight issues with the use of ECERS-R in high-stakes situations, such as accountability and funding decisions, as evidence linking ECERS-R scores to children's learning outcomes is limited. This suggests that while ECERS-R can provide a broad overview of quality, it may not fully reflect the aspects of provision that most strongly support children's learning and development. One limitation of ECERS-R is that it may not fully capture process quality, particularly teaching practices and adult–child interactions that support children's development (Gordon et al., 2015). Gordon et al. (2015) found that measuring structural quality alone, such as resources, space, and routines, does not fully reflect the quality of provision that supports children's learning outcomes. This is important for practice, as a setting may score well on environmental features while still offering limited opportunities for meaningful interaction and learning. While ECERS-R supports aspects of quality required by the National Minimum Standards, CIW guidance also highlights the importance of children's learning experiences and interactions Welsh Government (2023). This suggests that meeting environmental standards alone does not fully demonstrate high-quality practice.

To mitigate these concerns, a more recent version of the scale, ECERS-3, was developed. ECERS-3 measures different areas of quality, including learning opportunities, teacher–child interactions, maths activities, and gross motor provision (Early et al., 2018). Compared to ECERS-R, ECERS-3 places a greater focus on children's experiences within the setting and on how practitioners actively support learning, rather than focusing mainly on the physical environment (Neitzel et al., 2019). This suggests a change towards understanding quality as something shaped by practice, not just by resources. This reflects CIW expectations that quality goes beyond meeting National Minimum Standards and includes how practitioners support children's learning and wellbeing through everyday interactions (Welsh Government, 2023). In practice, this highlights that quality in early years settings is not only influenced by the availability of space and materials, but by how practitioners use the environment to support children's learning and development (Neitzel et al., 2019). Research also shows that ECERS-R and ECERS-3 do not always rate the same setting in the same way, suggesting that judgements about quality can vary depending on which version of the scale is used (Neitzel et al., 2019). This reinforces

the idea that quality is complex and that assessment tools should be used alongside professional judgement and reflective practice when evaluating early years provision.

The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWE) scale is an observational tool used to assess process quality in early years, with a focus on quality of adult child interactions, emotional wellbeing and pedagogy (Howard et al., 2018; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). The REPEY study by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) influenced the development of SSTEWE which highlighted that high quality adult and child interactions have a strong impact on children's learning and long-term outcomes. Additionally, research from the EPPE study identified sustained shared thinking as a key feature of effective early years provision (Silva et al., 2004). Furthermore, Howard et al. (2018) study found that higher scores on the SSTEWE scale are associated with stronger learning outcomes, emphasising the importance of high-quality interactions in early years practice. This suggests that, unlike ECERS, SSTEWE places more emphasis on process quality, particularly how practitioners support children's thinking, language, and emotional development through everyday interactions.

However, as SSTEWE relies on structured observation and professional judgement to assess quality (Howard et al., 2018), in practice there is a potential for variation in how it is interpreted. Waters and MacDonald, (2020) raise concerns that rating scales can encourage performative behaviour. Additionally, SSTEWE requires a deeper understanding of child development and effective interaction strategies, meaning that practitioners may need specific training to use the tool reliably (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). Without this, there is a risk that the tool is not used effectively, limiting its impact on improving practice. This suggests that while SSTEWE is useful, its reliance on professional judgement means it may not be used effectively without proper training. This may encourage practitioners to focus on scoring well rather than genuine changes to practice. Furthermore, SSTEWE focuses less on structural aspects of quality (Howard et al., 2018). SSTEWE was designed to build on tools such as ECERS by shifting the focus towards pedagogy and adult-child interactions rather than the physical environment (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). This means it may not fully capture whether a setting meets basic standards required for safety and organisation. For example, a setting may demonstrate strong

practitioner–child interactions but still lack appropriate resources or suitable environments, which are also important for children’s development. Under the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare in Wales, settings are required to meet statutory requirements relating to safety, staffing, premises and organisation (Welsh Government, 2023), which are not the primary focus of SSTEWS. This highlights that SSTEWS alone may not provide a complete picture of quality.

Both ECERS and SSTEWS are tools that aim to assess quality in early years settings, but they place emphasis on different aspects of provision. Earlier versions of ECERS focused largely on structural quality, such as the physical environment, resources, routines and organisation (Neitzel et al., 2019; Gordon et al., 2015), which aligns closely with the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare and supports Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) in judging whether settings meet basic requirements for safety and organisation (Welsh Government, 2023). More recent version, known as ECERS 3, place a greater emphasis on children’s experiences and adult–child interactions, reflecting a change towards process quality (Early et al., 2018; Neitzel et al., 2019). However, ECERS 3 continues to assess interactions within the wider context of the environment and provision as a whole. In contrast, SSTEWS is more focused on interaction and pedagogy, specifically how practitioners support children’s thinking, language development and emotional wellbeing through sustained shared thinking and responsive practice (Howard et al., 2018; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). A key difference between the two tools is that ECERS offers a wider overview of structural quality, making it useful for inspection and comparison across settings, but it may still not fully capture the depth of everyday interactions (Gordon et al., 2015). SSTEWS, on the other hand, provides a more detailed insight into practice, particularly the process quality in ways adult and child interact (Sylva et al., 2004; Howard et al., 2018). However, this reliance on professional judgement means SSTEWS can be more subjective and requires appropriate training to be used consistently (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023). Despite these differences, both tools have limitations when used in isolation. ECERS, even in its updated form, may not fully capture process quality, while SSTEWS does not assess whether settings meet essential structural and system requirements set out in the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2023). This suggests that neither tool alone provides a complete picture of quality. Used

together, ECERS and SSTEW provide a balanced view of quality, linking standards with children's experiences.

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