

For those working within the early years, quality is an essential part in a child's education, and this is as it has a lasting impact on all children's outcomes, future learning and life opportunities McAleavy, Challender and Walker (2024). Quality is the way in which settings should maintain and ensure that the provision provided is at the highest of quality for all children attending the setting, whilst ensuring positive and impactful experiences that can support the development of emotional, social and cognitive abilities for continuous learning throughout life (Foundation Years, No Date). McAleavy, Challender and Walker (2024) add to this by suggesting that one of the most fundamental parts of providing children with quality early years provision is the skills, experience and knowledge of the practitioners within the setting. Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2023) suggest that the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being (SSTEWE) scale it was created to support early years settings in supporting children to reach their full potential while attending a setting providing high quality care.

Quality assurance in the early years is the continual process in evaluating, monitoring and enhancing the quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), while simultaneously ensuring the setting is adhering to the relevant standards, these being the National Minimum Standards (NMS) (UNICEF, 2023). Welsh Government (2023) inform us that the National Minimum Standards are relevant for all registered childcare settings, and it must be adhered to and the necessary requirements met on a day-to-day basis within the early years setting.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project is the longest running, national study to sample children's development between the age of 3 and 7 years old, after attending a form of pre-school. Sylva *et al.*, (2004) discusses that throughout the carried-out research, it was demonstrated that there were beneficial impacts on the children's social, behavioural and intellectual development due to the high-quality provision provided to the children. Furthermore, Sylva *et al* (2004) states that the research identifies that by children having pre-school experiences, in comparison to none, supports children in further holistic development. This is due to children being provided with high-quality experiences, meaningful communication with staff and children, knowledgeable and experienced staff. An example of this is, by ensuring the staff within the setting are qualified and have continued their professional development throughout their time in the setting, can support the children in overall better outcomes and higher quality (Sylva, *et al.*, 2004).

Throughout the early years there are a wide variety of tools that support the early years in, these tools are in place to ensure high-quality education and care for all attending the setting. Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) discuss their recognition in developmental differences in children between the ages of 2 – 5 years old, however, it is suggested that if they are all provided with the significant support towards their development that the children have a better chance of reaching their fullest potential. Throughout the SSTEWE Scale, there are five areas that link to practice that are associated with areas of children's development, known as sub-scales. The five sub-scales are as follows, 1. Building trust, confidence and independence, 2. Social and emotional well-being, 3. Supporting and extending communication and language, 4. Supporting critical thinking and learning and 5. Assessing language and learning. Although the Welsh Government (2016) National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare sets the baseline standards and requirements for early years settings, the SSTEWE Scale (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015) adds additional means of support for settings to ensure settings are continuously aiming to improve their already high-quality education and the continuous professional development of the staff within the setting. Harms, Clifford and Cryer (2014) identifies the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) is designed to support the early years settings in both the interactions between children and staff, in addition to, the provision the setting provides and how these affect the development of children between the age of 3 and 5 years old.

If the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014) is compared and contrasted to the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-Being (SSTEWE) scale (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023), it is suggested that ECERS focuses on more than what the

SSTEWE scale, for instance, whereas the SSTEWE scale focusses more so on developing a high-quality setting, that provides high-quality education for children and meaningful interactions with adults in the setting to support their learning and development. Whereas the ECERS tool focusses on the environment that the children have access to, the learning and development the children are supported in, while ensuring the children are provided with meaningful adult and child interactions (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014)

To further discuss how tools alike ECERS and the SSTEWE Scale can further the baseline requirements provided by Welsh Government (2023) National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare, the area of professional development can be looked at. Welsh Government (2023) National Minimum Standards suggests that employees throughout the early years' settings should have the necessary qualifications and experience to support the children in meeting their fullest potential. It is essential that employees have the necessary qualifications, as it secures the employees understanding of child development, successfully supporting children with high-quality education and care and lastly, promoting the health and well-being of the children in their care (Early Years Alliance, 2019). However, the SSTEWE Scale (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023) identifies that there is a great importance of professional development for employees, by ensuring staff carrying out continuous professional development can allow for staff to provide children with better interactions, enhanced learning and ways in which staff can reflect on the interactions and learning opportunities the children have experienced. Therefore, adapting and scaffolding ways in which children can be provided with better high-quality learning opportunities to provide them with lifelong learning opportunities (McAleavy, Challender and Walker, 2024).

This links to ECERS (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014) as, it suggests that assessments can be made in relation to the level of adult to child interaction the children receive. By allowing the staff to make assessments of their own interactions with the children attending the setting can encourage professional development of the staff to ensure that they are providing high-quality of care for the children (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014). However, Spark (2021) provide a self-assessment document that allows for staff within the setting to reflect upon how they view that they have successfully or unsuccessful supported a child. This document is based on the SSTEWE Scale and can support the member of staff in identifying ways in which they can further support a child and develop a scaffold to support further learning and development (Spark, 2021). It is vital that all children within the setting are supported to the staffs' best abilities, no matter their age, ability or disability. All children should be provided with the same opportunities and support to thrive throughout their education (Department of Education, 2024). Department of Education (2024) details that all children should have access to high-quality education and care, where their needs are sufficiently met and, in a setting, where they have access to a wide variety of education opportunities. Welsh Government (2023) Standard 4 discusses the importance of each child within the setting should have their needs met on a daily basis, and the setting the children attend should demonstrate and ensure this to the families of the children. For this to be met, it is essential that the staff have the relevant qualifications and where necessary receive further training to ensure the support and the needs of all individual children in the setting are being met.

ECERS (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014), in comparison to the SSTEWE Scale (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2023) has deep focus the learning environment that the children are provided with, and how the environment is able to support children's learning and development to the best possible standards. This focuses further into the resources the children have access to, are they stimulated within the environment and what sort of routine does the day follow – is the routine strict and beneficial or a relaxed routine which does not provide as much structure as there could be? By ensuring that children have a adequate routine and a high-quality learning environment can ensure that children are provided with a sense of security within the setting, excellent learning opportunities and support for the children's physical, social and emotional well-being (Luby, Rogers and McLaughlin, 2021).

Welsh Government (2023) National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare, Standard 22: Environment suggests that the environment that children have access to in the early years should be safe and secure, while being suitable for all types of learning for children. Welsh Government (2023) discusses that children should have access to an outdoor learning area as it is beneficial for their learning and exploration. Furthermore, Welsh Government (2023) Standard 23: Equipment suggests that all equipment, toys and furniture provided within the setting should be easily accessible and stimulating for all children, however, toys within the setting must comply with toy safety regulations where possible. The toys available within the setting must be appropriate for children of the relevant ages within the setting, for example, safe for children between the ages of 2 and 5 years old.

For all early year settings, it is essential that there is a continual drive in ensuring the highest quality of care and education is provided, this is as there is always something more than can be done to improve and drive the settings to achieving and providing the best for all within the setting (Foundation Years, No Date). By ensuring additional tools like Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014) and Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015) can support the settings in gaining a further understanding on how they can best improve the setting in a variety of areas to ensure the environment is providing high-quality learning environment for all children. Furthermore, early years settings can use previous CIW inspection reports to further enhance the setting. Care Inspectorate Wales (2019) identifies that a inspection report will include clear recommendations of ways in which the setting should improve a specific area, these must be acted upon as soon as possible, this is due to inspectors viewing something within the setting being unsafe or unsuitable. This is one way that staff can improve areas within the setting, while being provided with clear and concise information of the necessary adaptations (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2019). Furthermore, by ensuring the use of Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014) and Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) (Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015) can ensure of continuous development within the setting and be held accountable for any changes needed within, by ensuring the setting carries these out can enhance the provision the children have access to and high-quality standards of care all settings should aim for.

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

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