

Childcare settings and childcare quality ^[1]

Seminar Three, Third ICMEC International Seminar Series

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On 9th February Professor Kathy Sylva, professor of Educational Psychology and Head of the Child Care Quality Team at the Department of Education, University of Oxford, gave a fascinating and extensive presentation at the third seminar in the second series of ICMEC international seminars.

Kathy Sylva is one of the leaders of the DCSF research on effective pre-school, primary and secondary education (EPPSE) and on the evaluations of the Graduate Leader Fund and the Early Learning Partnership Project. A dominant theme throughout her work has been the impact of education and care not only on 'academic knowledge' but on children's problem-solving, social skills and dispositions to learn. A related theme in her research is the impact of early interventions on combating social disadvantage and exclusion. She was specialist Adviser to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education in 2000-2001 and again in 2005-08. She was awarded an OBE in 2008 for services to children and families.

Her topic for 9th February was the way in which the relationship between childcare quality and young children's development has been measured in a number of major UK studies and what this tells us about the type of provision which best promotes children's educational outcomes. Her focus was on the use of the revised and extended versions of an instrument originally developed some thirty years ago: the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, which has been substantially informed by practitioner views since then. A reference to a paper by Kathy Sylva and others is found below.

Professor Sylva explained and illustrated the use of ECERS-R and ECERS-E and the differences between them with reference to the impact of childcare quality for children aged 3 to 5 in three major studies: the longitudinal Effective Pre-school Education (EPPE) Study and its follow-up studies, the Neighbourhood Nurseries Evaluation and the Millennium Cohort Study. In NNI and MCS, the Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale - ITERS - had also been used to measure the impact of childcare quality on children aged 0 to 3.

Both the EPPE and the MCS findings clearly showed the superior impact of maintained provision, that is provision in state-funded nursery classes and schools and integrated early childhood centres, on children's later educational outcomes. Professor Sylva emphasised that it is only the impact of certain quality dimensions to do with teaching style and the qualifications of those in the rooms observed which can still be detected in children's educational outcomes at age 11. While not disputing the importance of other dimensions of quality, it was hard to detect their lasting impact on children's educational outcomes.

In her response, Professor Helen Penn pointed out that it was hard to see evidence of the impact of such painstaking studies on current and recent early childhood policy in this country. Neither did she see any indication that provision would or could be improved on the basis of these findings, as practitioners would have great difficulty using such research instruments to improve practice quality in situation over which they had no control. Findings like these did not address the major concerns raised by OECD, the EU and UNICEF about, equitable access, childcare quality and the balance between work and family life. She doubted whether the 'permitting circumstances' for childcare quality as identified by the various versions of ECERS, were present in the majority of early education and childcare group settings. It could be argued that the present mixed market economy of childcare rendered the early childhood care and education system in England 'dysfunctional', certainly as compared with systems such as those found in France, Hungary and Finland.

The seminar chair, ICMEC's co-director Eva Lloyd, had to give to the audience apologies from the second discussant, Carol Jenkins, Managing Director of Places for Children. Recovering from a recent serious illness meant she was unable to attend this seminar, but she hoped to provide an input at a future ICMEC event.

In the wide-ranging discussion that followed the presentation and the response, members of the audience explored these issues raised further and some questioned the continuing relevance of this type of research findings when the nature of provision is changing so rapidly. The proportion of 'maintained' provision for 0 to 5 year olds within the current mixed economy of childcare had after all declined significantly. Childcare qualifications, in particular the potential contribution of Early Years Professional Status, were critically discussed.

Region: Europe ^[2]

Tags: quality ^[3]

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Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/09/11/childcare-settings-and-childcare-quality> [2]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality>