

## Questions of Quality: The Contribution of Research Evidence to Definitions of Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care Practice

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### Introduction

I am very pleased to be here today in Dublin Castle and I am especially conscious of the expertise present, not just in this room, but in the whole of Ireland. In preparing for this presentation, I took a look at the OMEP Ireland Conference Proceedings (Horgan and Douglas, 2002). There were some extremely exciting papers, many of which make similar points to those I would like to make today.

I have also been looking at some other Irish documents and research, and it is wonderful that Ireland is focusing on birth to 6 as a whole in the development of a framework and not dividing it into birth to three and three to six. In one of the CECDE projects, "*Talking about Quality*" (CECDE, 2003), it is great to note the importance placed on play and diversity and also to see that people in general regard the concept of quality as complex and multi-faceted.

The recently published OECD report has made some important recommendations and what is crucial is that these points are debated within Ireland (OECD, 2004). When *Starting Strong*, a review of Early Childhood Education and Care in several different countries came out in England, it raised the question as to whether perhaps the Swedish model was the one that other countries should aspire to. On the other hand, my colleagues in Sweden felt that there was much still to be done and continued to improve on their own understanding of Quality.

Similarly, great work is being done in Reggio Emilia in Italy, where children are regarded as strong and capable individuals, but despite the success of this model in Italy, you cannot simply take its message and transplant it to other countries – there are cultural issues to consider and you need to debate how things will work. This is the exciting thing about the Question of Quality - time and place change our definitions of what it means. We need to keep reviewing these issues and redefining them through more and more research and this is the main thrust of my presentation here today.

Defining quality can be a difficult and culture-laden task and many colleagues have contributed to the debate about the importance of community involvement in defining quality (eg. Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999). So the focus of today's paper is on how research can contribute to the definition and application of quality for all children. I would like to explore the messages from three different research reviews and examine issues arising

from their cultural origins, as well as their implications. I have personally been involved in two of these projects, *Birth to Three Matters* (David *et al.*, 2003) and the *British Educational Research Association Special Early Years Interest Group Review* (BERA – SIG, 2003). I would also like to take a look at a third review carried out in the United States by Sharon Lynn Kagan (Kagan, 2004).

### **Birth to Three Matters**

So firstly, I'd like to discuss the *Birth to Three Matters* literature review (David *et al.*, 2003). This review was carried out as part of a project commissioned by the DfES in London to develop guidelines for early childhood educators working with children from birth to three in England. The project was directed by Professor Lesley Abbott at Manchester Metropolitan University who asked me to head up the team responsible for the review of research literature which underpinned the Framework. As part of the review, we spoke to people all over the world, searched all kinds of databases, listened to focus groups, not just about the content of the framework but also about how it should be produced. Our overall objective was to make it relevant and meaningful, to make it exciting and useful, while still retaining the academic basis. One of the ways we managed this was by using stories of real children, observations of the wonderful and brilliant things that young children say and do.

In the presentation of the material, we made a decision to move from the traditional domains of cognitive development, emotional development etc. to four different interwoven aspects, those of:

- A Strong Child;
- A Skilful Communicator;
- A Competent Learner; and
- A Healthy Child.

And each of these aspects was subdivided into four components. These were derived from Professor Abbott's collaborative research with practitioners concerning their expectations of the Framework, so in writing the review, we naturally wanted our presentation of the research to follow the same structure.

After reviewing over 500 publications, the conclusions were much as one might have anticipated and indeed, may seem obvious and simple. Young children come into the world seemingly 'programmed' to be curious, to learn, to be social and to communicate and that they learn best when they have opportunities to observe and interact through play and to talk with those who love them (adults and children). So research is now backing up what we in the field already knew about the absolute importance of these interactions.

Having drawn these conclusions relatively easily from the review, the really difficult part is ensuring that we can, as a society, achieve these conditions for every child. The research we accessed was mainly Western research, that is, from post-industrial societies and this begs the question as to what extent it was culturally blind or biased. Furthermore, the research was almost all in English and again, we had to question whether that was simply one particular subjective view of quality, and if so, whether this was acceptable. Indeed, are there universal children's needs? And is there some panacea in terms of quality education that can be applied to all societies? These are interesting questions.

In the *Birth to Three Matters* project, we thought long and hard about the need to expose the influences of assumptions, expectations and values in research. These aspects need to be clarified when research is used to underpin policy and practice, particularly when developing guidelines for practice. We need more information from societies with different histories and traditions, to widen our thinking and to challenge our accepted ideas.

#### **The *British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group***

The second literature review I was involved in was the *British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group's* review of research on pedagogy, curriculum and adult roles, which focused particularly on British research covering the age group from three to seven years of age (BERA – SIG, 2003).

As with *Birth to Three Matters*, we wanted the review to be useful both to the academic community and also to practitioners. It was decided to produce an academic review first, followed by a small user review, which was subsequently launched at Westminster along with other BERA user reviews. It was exciting that the Special Interest Group brought together such a large number of contributors, who worked in three subgroups - each focusing on either pedagogy, curriculum or adult roles. The birth to three age group was only touched upon, since the Group felt a wider age range would result in too much information. The main focus was on children aged from three to eight, in group and nursery early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, and Key Stage 1 in schools.

The key messages from this review were, again, familiar to us. Young children learn best when they have opportunities to play and talk with familiar adults and children, where they are able to make choices, where the adults share the thinking and where adults are sensitive to children's leads (see for example Gopnik *et al.*, 1999; Hirsch-Pasek and Michnik Golinkoff, 2003; Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith, 2001).

One of the key pieces of research we used on the role of the adult was from the *Effective Provision of Preschool Education* (EPPE) project by Iram Siraj Blatchford and Kathy Sylva (Sylva *et al.*, 2004), looking at the ways in which adults can get involved in children's play without taking over. To do this effectively requires an awareness of the theoretical aspects of play, thus avoiding a rigid or very formal experience for children. Adults need to be able to blend in with the fluid and ambiguous nature of play (Sutton-Smith, 1999) in order to make learning meaningful to children, while still being conscious of planning and outcomes. Some very worrying feedback from the English Key Stage 1 sector and the year R, which is part of the Foundation Stage (age 3 to 5), is that in some cases, children are becoming bored with the amount of formal 'work' they are expected to do. This is a disturbing development in relation to definitions of quality. If those definitions of quality are very rigid in terms of expected outcomes, then this is what will happen unless staff understand how to embed these in a less formal practice. Clearly there are implications for staff training here.

Play of course, does not easily lend itself to predicted or prescribed outcomes. While the paucity of British research about learning through play leads to the conclusion that play is not yet proven as **the** most effective way to teach young children, it is still evident that many early childhood educators need more training about how to teach through play. In addition, many lack confidence in this approach, particularly when faced with regulation through inspections. This means that in many settings young children are being inappropriately taught through overly formal methods – and this at a time when analysts from other fields are suggesting that life and work in the future will demand a 'play ethic' (Kane, 2004).

Our research evidence, collated for the BERA review, led us to identify certain gaps that exist within the assessment process, such as measuring children's spiritual development. Some things are simply not easy to measure. How, for example, do you measure love or joy? A further debate within the BERA SIG (2003) related to what rigorous research actually means. There was some discussion over whether the only kind of research that was seen as rigorous and respected by government was quantitative. How do we have qualitative measures that reflect the holistic experience of practice? And how do we engage children as participants in the feedback process? These are issues which need to be debated when we talk about quality.

### **Kagan's Review of US Research on Quality**

Earlier this year, at a conference in Northern Italy, I had the pleasure of listening to a presentation by Sharon Lynn Kagan (2004) who had conducted a very interesting review of the research literature in the US to see what it could tell us about quality in ECEC. Much

of her conclusions were very relevant, as they were themes that were already being discussed in the United Kingdom.

She noticed that past measures of quality had tended to focus on issues such as staff turnover, salaries and conditions, and peer mentoring. These are clearly important matters. If staff turnover is particularly high, children do not have time to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with staff. Also, staff salaries and conditions in the ECEC sector have traditionally been very poor, and so it is necessary to examine this. Peer mentoring among staff has been regarded as a further quality indicator, that is, how staff help one another as a team and how they discuss the children among themselves, and so on. While these are important measures, more recent work in the field has come to view the whole issue of quality as more complex than this and current measures have tended to explore more structural variables such as funding, regulation, governance and standards.

Kagan's (2004) review, however, identified several omissions in measuring quality in America, elements that our own research also uncovered, such as children's emotional and social development. Sometimes, there can be such an emphasis on academic outcomes that teachers are perhaps not necessarily sharing information on these other aspects of children's development. Moreover, they may have unrealistic expectations of children and of what is meaningful to them, particularly teachers who may not have much experience in the early years. But emotional and social development are fundamental to cognitive development.

In the US, Kagan (2004) found that there were significant differences in expectations of standards in ECEC settings and in those applied to schools. Why is this? Should these be so different or should they be brought together?

In England, there are currently plans to develop out-of-hours care in schools. This is a very welcome development, especially for parents, but recent research has shown that children do not particularly want to spend extra time in schools because they associate school with work. This should lead us to take a look at our schools and ask why they are places that children don't want to be? Should we not want them to be vibrant, stimulating places? Should there not be spaces for relaxation in schools? We have to turn things on their head and start asking ourselves different questions.

Kagan (2004) also signalled the changing expectations of children in certain societies and the changing views of what needs to be measured. In the US for example (and this is also the case in the UK), there is an increased emphasis on early numeracy and literacy, and its importance to the workforce. The underlying rationale was that children should

become skilled in these areas very early so as to be ready for the workforce. And while I am not suggesting a neglect of literacy and numeracy, there has to be careful consideration of **how** this is effected. Formal teaching is not necessarily the most effective preparation for the workforce or most meaningful to young children.

The other point that Kagan (2004) made is one that I touched on earlier, the issue of integration at policy level. Every law and policy in society and everything that you do in a country will impinge on your children, so you have to think about your policies and how they all fit together. What is needed is a kind of ecology of human development. Quality in ECEC, and how it is measured, is contingent on policies, and not only those policies specifically concerned with ECEC. There is a knock-on effect with every policy decision.

### **Implications and the Influence of Culture**

So, what are the implications and the influences of culture in all this? Well, I think that what we've got to ask ourselves in the first instance is: what do we value about early childhood? Do we appreciate the brilliance and competence of young children? What do we value in our communities? Historically, French policies were much more focused on children and families than in the UK and the US. The child was placed at the centre and regarded as a citizen from birth, and policy decisions were more family centred. In the UK, if you were a mother who wanted to go to work, it was considered your own business and there were few support systems. While the UK has moved on from that, it illustrates cultural differences and how they can influence policy.

Another crucial question we need to ask is: what do we value about early childhood educators? What kind of salaries, conditions and training and continuing professional development do they have? Are they highly educated? Because if we do not think it important for them to be highly educated (see, for example, MacNaughton, 2003), then what are we saying about the children? If we regard children as brilliant, capable, strong and clever, then we must show that the people who work with them are also brilliant, capable, strong and clever. We need to acknowledge the importance of professional development, but also deal with the dilemma of the perceived loss that accompanies that professionalisation. Some very recent research suggests that there is a **perception** that as educators become more professional and more highly educated, they lose the enthusiasm and 'personal touch' that less highly qualified educators have. We need to question why this perception is the case; why do some people think we would be sacrificing one for the other?

For an excellent illustration of cultural influences and assumptions, it is very much worth reading Mikki Rosenthal's (2003) article for the European Early Childhood Education Research Journal. Rosenthal's piece was based on her study of children's place in society,

how certain societies want their children to be individuals and other societies want them to be part of a community, and how they are educated in different ways based on these cultural biases. This came across strongly in our own research (David *et al.*, 2000) and I feel that somehow we need to incorporate both of these approaches - to help our children to be strong and individual in certain situations, yet interdependent in others. Furthermore, educators need to be aware of the 'ecological niches' individual children occupy, as well as being able to mediate children's learning where there is a 'cultural gap' between the home (or an earlier ECEC setting) and the current setting.

Finally, looking at regulation and measurement and the imposition of standards, we need to examine not just what is measured, but what is not measured. How can we have some qualitative measures?

And who decides on the standards set up to measure or define quality? Who are the stakeholders and the experts? Where are the voices of children in all of this? Where does the research to inform these standards come from and what part does it play? Should such standards be regarded as the bare minimum, or should they work along a continuum of quality, challenging for excellence? Should they be open or prescriptive?

Working on the two reviews, and listening to Sharon Lynn Kagan, simply confirmed my beliefs in how children learn best. What it also did was make me very aware of the task ahead of us in ensuring that ever better services are available for all children. But more than that, the research made me even more respectful of children themselves and of their abilities.

Thank you!

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