

Defining, Assessing and Supporting Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education: The High/Scope Ireland Model

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Introduction

“Quality” has become a buzz word in recent times. When we visit the shops we want quality merchandise. We judge the service industry by the quality of the service provided.

Those involved in early childhood care and education know that the word quality is without doubt on our agenda. It has become a local, national and indeed a global issue and rightly so. But what is quality? It could be defined as a very high standard, be that of product or service.

High/Scope Ireland works for quality. It was founded in 1999 as a non-profit making body. It continues the work today which began originally in Ypsilanti, Michigan in the U.S.A. It was here in the early sixties that it became clear that some children from low income families were in need of special educational services due to the various difficulties they were experiencing within the school system. The challenges encountered were:

- A high drop-out rate – 50%;
- A high rate of juvenile delinquency;
- Low test scores (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002).

As a result of these findings a preschool unit was planned and set-up in 1962, alongside an existing school known as Perry. This project, as it then became known, was called the Perry Preschool Project. It was under the auspices of David Weikart, the director of special services for the Ypsilanti public schools that this project was set-up. The goal was to prepare children from disadvantaged areas for future success in school. This preschool was designed to compare children’s progress in the Perry Preschool Programme with the progress of children with no preschool experience. It became a longitudinal study that has continued to track the progress of these children who are now in their forties (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1993).

Some of the Results of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study

- Children are better prepared for school;
- Less need of special education;
- Better high school (secondary school) graduation rates;

- Fewer criminal arrests;
- Cost effective as a social investment (research has found that for every \$1 the taxpayer spent on the High/Scope programme the taxpayer also spent \$7.16 on the non-programme group) (Weikart, 2004).

David Weikart left special services in 1970 to set-up the High/Scope Research Foundation, which was, and still is, committed to the production and use of knowledge of education and human development that will increase the life chances of children throughout the world. Sadly, David Weikart died in December of 2003 – may he rest in peace. However, the work for quality care and education continues.

So to the question – how do we define quality? We need some specifics. Where is there a better place to start than with a mission statement. Gillian Pugh (1999) gave the following quote as one indicator of quality:... *“clearly defined aims and objectives and serious consideration of what we want for children as the starting point of how to achieve that.”*

Without doubt, all involved with early childhood care and education will need a much discussed and well thought-out mission statement, clearly stating what the goals for children are.

High/Scope bases its educational approach on four guiding principles:

- From birth through to adulthood, the individual develops awareness and understanding through active involvement with people, materials, events and ideas;
- Learning is most effective when the individual plans, carries out and reflects on intentional activities;
- A variety of developmentally appropriate learning experiences contributes to the individual’s intellectual, social, emotional and physical development;
- Consistent support and shared-control with children and respect for personal decision-making strengthens the individual’s confidence. (Epstein and Schweinhart, 1996)

Communities, programme co-ordinators, teachers and parents all have an important stake in improving or maintaining the quality of programmes they provide for young children.

The following are some elements that High/Scope research has identified as vital for a high quality programme:

- Low enrolment limits, with care-giving teams (sixteen to twenty children with two adults);

- A child development curriculum;
- Staff trained in early childhood development;
- Supervisory support and in-service training for the child development curriculum;
- Involvement of parents as partners with programme staff;
- Developmentally appropriate evaluation procedures;
- Sensitivity to the non-educational needs of children. (The Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983).

Looking at the first element, High/Scope finds that working with any number of children under twenty promotes creativity, while providing an environment for group collaboration.

The second element identified by research – a child development curriculum – covers to some extent the remaining elements outlined. Let's look a little closer. *"In the High/Scope approach to early childhood care and education, adults and children share control. We recognise that the power to learn resides in the child, hence the focus on active learning practices. When we accept that learning comes from within, we achieve a critical balance in educating young children. The adults' role is to support and guide young children through their active learning experiences. I believe this is what makes our programme work so well."* (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002:3) It holds true that when a person is intrinsically motivated that is, involved in something they enjoy, are in control of, and are interested in, it is highly probable they will be successful in what they are doing and grow in competence and confidence.

The curriculum, which is based on Piaget's Constructivist Theory and the work of John Dewey, has the following goals:

- To develop children's ability to take the initiative and make decisions about what they are going to do and how;
- To develop children's self-discipline and their ability to identify certain goals and complete chosen tasks;
- To develop children's ability to work with other children and adults so that work done is a result of group planning, co-operative effort and shared leadership;
- To develop children's ability for self-expression so they can use language, pictures, movement and writing to share their experiences with others;
- To develop children's ability to apply their reasoning in a wide range of situations while using a variety of materials;
- To develop children's creativity, spirit of enquiry and openness to knowledge and other people's points of view. (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002)

The High/Scope curriculum promotes quality by having a learning environment with distinctive work areas. The home corner area, block area etc., have appropriate materials

which are accessible, and are stored and labelled so children can find, use and return them.

Through the High/Scope daily routine, which includes the unique sequence of plan-do-review for the pre-school child, and sequences like small group time, choice time and nap time for the infant and toddler, children can predict what comes next and choose to be involved in large or small group times (Post and Hohmann, 2000).

High/Scope key experiences gives us a clear idea of the thoughts and actions of children. These key experiences guide adults as they observe, support and plan activities which focus on children's strengths. High/Scope promotes the collaborative approach between child and adult. This is of paramount importance in creating a psychologically safe environment where adults can:

- Share control with children;
- Focus on their strengths;
- Support their play;
- Use a problem-solving approach to conflict.

Adults work in partnership throughout the day with the child and with the rest of the staff team. It is this teamwork that is vital for the assessment procedure. This is again another identified element of quality. The procedure involves staff observing and taking notes, discussing and analysing, with reference to the key experiences, the child's learning needs. These observations are used by the team to plan the next day's programme.

The benefits and advantages of the practice of taking notes on a daily basis are:

- It accurately shows change and development of a child over time;
- It is based on real performances rather than artificial testing situations;
- It provides essential daily information which is useful for planning;
- It is an ongoing record of each child's ability;
- It helps identify the 'invisible' child;
- It can be used by all staff;
- It is effective for parent/teacher meetings;
- It encourages adults and programmers to become more child oriented. (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002)

At intervals throughout the year, these observations are used to complete the Child Observation Record (COR). This is an assessment instrument, which facilitates practitioners' observation of a child over time.

Parental involvement is another essential element of quality promotion. High/Scope understands the fact that children in early years' settings are from diverse family backgrounds. Parental involvement is essential to develop an understanding of similarities and differences within these cultures. Then, these become an integral part of the learning environment. High/Scope acknowledges that staff need to continuously work toward becoming expert in their field – again another essential element of high quality programmes.

High/Scope promotes supervisory support, ongoing training and revisiting of the High/Scope curriculum. This keeps the curriculum alive. Continuous reflection is vital for practitioners assessing their current knowledge and skills and identifying further training needs. Other areas that High/Scope sees as vital for children are the areas of movement and music where the whole body is used to extend co-ordination and learning.

High/Scope has an external accreditation process where staff and managers using the High/Scope approach, use the Programme Quality Assessment (PQA) tool to assess all areas of the curriculum. This is done while each centre receives ongoing cluster group training supported by on-site development work.

Conclusion

If you would like to further extend your knowledge and understanding of the High/Scope philosophy and the elements necessary for defining quality, assessing quality and assuring quality; a reference list is included at the end of this article. You can also visit the High/Scope website and browse through the research at www.highscope.org. The findings show that the quality provided by the High/Scope curriculum facilitated children working to their full potential in the present day, as well as having long term benefits.

The final element High/Scope has identified as being necessary for a high quality programme is sensitivity to the non-educational needs of children. All involved in early childhood care and education continuously speak of the holistic development of human beings. We do this by being attentive to children. We attend to their physical well-being, to their bodies, whether they are hungry, in pain, too hot or too cold etc.

Adults also need to attend to the feelings of children, acknowledging and then addressing sadness, happiness, fear and anger. Adults need to be gentle and caring in this process. Intellectual development has always been high on the agenda and we need to feed and nurture this development, while remembering that it is only a part, and not all, of who the child is.

If we, who value quality in early childhood care and education, grow our own understanding of what it is to be gentle, caring, kind, a good listener, trustworthy, humble and supportive, will we not go a long way in our efforts to define and indeed achieve quality care?

Remember, there can be no care without education, and no education without care. Pay attention and flowers blossom.

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