

FIRST CLASS RESULTS

The EPPE project – the biggest study ever conducted in Europe of early years education and care – has begun unveiling its results. **Jerome Monahan** spoke to team member **Kathy Sylva** to find out more

Kathy Sylva is a professor of educational psychology at Oxford University and a key member of the five-strong Effective Provision of Pre-school Education core research team. It was her experiences in the early 70s, setting up and occasionally working in a childcare centre at Harvard University while studying for her doctorate that inspired her to pursue applied psychology. “I moved from blue skies scientific research,” she explains, “to using psychological concepts and methods to improve the lives of children and their families.” Now, after nearly eight years of detailed and extensive research, EPPE is revealing findings that help underscore the value of the Government’s investment in care and education provision for children in their preschool years.

Jerome Monahan: EPPE is described as a ‘longitudinal’ study. What does this mean?

Kathy Sylva: Essentially, it observes a group of children as they grow older. We began with children aged three, and have now reported on their

progress up to seven. But we have also been able to study their lives back to birth, thanks to information we collected from parents about their children’s histories to date – the kinds of care they have had, their health, their birth-weight and so on.

JM: What have been the biggest challenges associated with EPPE?

KS: Co-ordinating the collection of all our data has been an enormous job – after all, EPPE is the biggest study ever conducted in Europe of early years education and care. So far, we’ve tracked the development of more than 3,000 children for seven years – 2,800 who received some form of early years provision, and a control of 300 or so who did not. We’ve assessed them at critical moments in their development between the ages of three and seven.

It takes time to gain the confidence of a child before you can present them with the sort of games and tasks that helped us assess their cognitive and linguistic development. We’ve also talked to the people looking after the children in their various care and

education settings about their social and emotional development. And we also conducted more than 3,000 one-to-one conversations with parents.

JM: EPPE’s also studied the ‘value added’ impact of early years provision. What does this actually mean?

KS: Basically, we tried to measure the value added to each of our 2,800 participants’ development by the pre-school that they attended, and the fact that we did this is one of the things that makes EPPE so exceptional – unique, even.

We know what our participating children were like as they began pre-school, and we’ve also charted

KATHY SYLVA
“Early years provision used to be a bit of a policy Cinderella – now it’s more of a policy princess!”



Richard Okon

Key EPPE findings include:

- The benefit to children of prolonged periods (either part- or full-time) in an effective care or educational setting before starting school
- The value to disadvantaged children of effective pre-school experiences
- Information on the best kinds of adult/child interactions in pre-school settings
- Information on the importance of the home learning environment
- Information on the impact a child’s pre-school experiences can have on their later development

The EPPE study will report on children’s development into Key Stage 1 this autumn – and continue monitoring its target group as they move on into Key Stage 2.

“The best settings actually combine care and education”

how the various pre-school settings have played a role in boosting their development. So we’ve been able to pinpoint those that took a child from the bottom 10 per cent, say, in terms of literacy or social development to the next 35 per cent by the time they had to go into a reception class.

This means we have been able to show statistically how much of the developmental progress is down to actual early childhood settings.

JM: So what are the main conclusions you’ve arrived at?

KS: We studied 141 randomly selected pre-school settings and found quality in every sector, but the maintained education sector had higher quality overall. What EPPE discovered was that the best settings actually combine care and education. That was a surprise to me personally, and I was very pleased to see it.

JM: How did you assess each setting?

KS: We used the early childhood environment rating scale (ECERS), which assesses everything from displays to toilet routines. It also looks at the quality of interactions between the staff and children – one test of this was to observe whether staff actually waited for an answer when they asked a child a question.

JM: EPPE went in for an even closer look at some particularly successful settings – what did this show you?

KS: From the 141 settings overall, we chose twelve which appeared to have a significant impact on aspects of development. It was thanks to those case studies that we really picked up on, for example, the benefits of adults helping children to talk through conflicts. Getting children to think about how everyone felt after a bust-up had taken place, and what could be done next time something similar happened, proved far more effective than any imposed solutions.

JM: And are there any important findings concerning parenting?

KS: Yes! A parent’s qualifications or job are less of a factor in the child’s progress than the parent’s desire to help the child interpret their environment, including such things as reading to them, or taking them out on trips. What EPPE has not explored is the boost, if any, to a child’s development if mothers, for instance, are subject to some sort of training in parenting – you would need an experimental study to establish that.

JM: Does it surprise you that it is only in 2004 that proof of the benefits of early years’ provision is emerging?

KS: Not really. The Government has clearly had other priorities – getting the literacy and numeracy strategies going, and revolutionising primary provision. Meanwhile, a lot of local progress has been getting underway. Since 1997, though, the Government searchlight and the funds have finally come together. Before then, early years provision was definitely a policy Cinderella – now it’s something of a policy princess!

► For more information:

Details of the various EPPE reports published to date can be found here: www.surestart.gov.uk/ensuringquality/research/earlyyears/eppe/