

How children learn 3

Contemporary thinking and theorists

by Linda Pound

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Kathy Sylva

PROFILE

Kathy Sylva describes herself as a developmental psychologist but she is much more. Her work has had an immense impact on early years policy since she came to England in 1975. Today her influence continues through the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project.

LINKS

- *How Children Learn 1*
Bruner
High/Scope

Her life

An American, Sylva worked with another famous American at Oxford University, Jerome Bruner. Under his direction she worked on a study which came to be known as the Oxford Pre-School Research. At that time relatively few large-scale early years research projects had been developed in this country. Since then she has been engaged in a number of highly influential and prestigious research programmes. Sylva's early work for her PhD at Harvard University had focused on play. She has commented on what she learnt from this experience, in which she took 180 toddlers out of their playgroup one by one into a play laboratory, in order to test their ability to solve problems. In discussion with Guardian reporter Karen Gold she states that "the irony of dragging children away from a natural learning experience to give them an unnatural learning experience made me realise that I wanted to study children in real settings from then on" - and she has.

The Oxford Pre-school Research Project was a three year study undertaken between 1975 and 1978. Its focus was care for the under-fives - in nursery schools, playgroups, day-care centres and at childminders. Bruner's focus, as director of the project, was "what is good care?" He himself admitted that the questions raised by his research went far beyond the scope of social scientists and that the team had "been forced to raise questions about fundamental values for which we have no answers" (Bruner 1980). He went on to suggest that he believed that "the questions will themselves be of value". This has proved to be a rather perceptive view.

Her writing

A book entitled *Childwatching at playgroup and nursery school* was written by Kathy Sylva as part of the Oxford Pre-school research in the 1980s. The book focused on what young children were actually doing. It is described on The Children's Society website as 'questioning an unbridled free play ideology'. Sylva and her colleagues devised a system of tracking a target child and recording their actions and interactions through the use of a code. This process has been used in a number of subsequent research studies and made it possible to gather and analyse a large amount of research data.

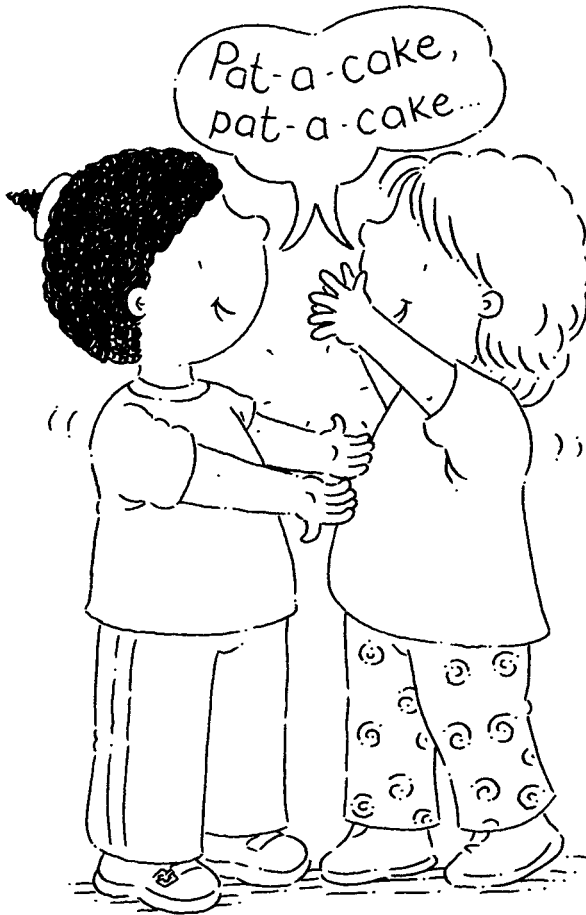
Kathy Sylva has described herself as "an ace evaluator". She describes her pleasure at identifying the patterns that emerge from complex and large scale research data - patterns which make it possible to identify statistically significant trends and indicators. She has been involved in the evaluation of the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) project; the High/Scope programme when it was first introduced into this country; and the Reading Recovery programme.

Currently Sylva is probably best known for her work, alongside Edward Melhuish; Pam Sammons and Iram Siraj-Blatchford, on the EPPE project. This studied 3,000 children as they moved from pre-school into Key Stage 1. The project lasted from 1997 - 2003. Its aim was to identify the most effective forms of pre-school provision. Since that time the same children have been studied as they moved into Key Stage 2. This project is known as the Effective pre-school and Primary Education Project (EPPE3-11). Sylva says of this work "we've shown that if a child goes to a really good pre-school, it's a protection against a not very good primary school." The project is currently moving into two further phases, namely EPPSE 3-14 and EEPSE 16+ which are looking at the outcomes for students in secondary education.

Her theories and research

The key findings of the EPPE project published in 2003 identified outcomes which are directly related to day-to-day work with young children and their families. These include findings that:

- **Pre-school experience enhances children's development.** Disadvantaged children gain most, especially if the setting they attend has a good social mix of



children. "For a poor child, not going to pre-school (is) like tying their hands behind their backs for the rest of primary school."

- **Longer periods of attendance overall improve independence, concentration and the ability to get along with others.** Intellectual development is also improved. However full-time provision does not of itself offer advantages over part-time provision.
- **Good quality provision may be found in all kinds of setting.** However it was most consistently high in integrated centres, nursery schools and nursery classes. Settings where staff and particularly managers had higher qualifications offered better outcomes for children. Where appropriately qualified teachers are involved provision is also enhanced.
- **Opportunities for sustained, shared conversation and thinking with children promote effective learning.**
- **Parents and carers make a real impact on children's learning.** What parents do with children at home makes a difference, and this makes the work of

practitioners in influencing and guiding parents vital to children's long-term success. The project developed a rating scale for the Home Learning Environment. The children of families who scored highly, regardless of income and qualifications, had higher achievements and better social and behavioural outcomes. The index includes:

- Reading to a child
- Teaching songs and rhymes
- Painting and drawing
- Taking children on visits
- Offering opportunities for children to play with friends at home.

- **Children who play are more effective problem-solvers.** They are able to come up with more new ideas and are more relaxed. They have fewer frustrations and less fear of failure. "We get more and more confident that there really is something about play-based and informal education for children before school that really is beneficial. It's more important that they play than have a formal education."

Putting the theory into practice

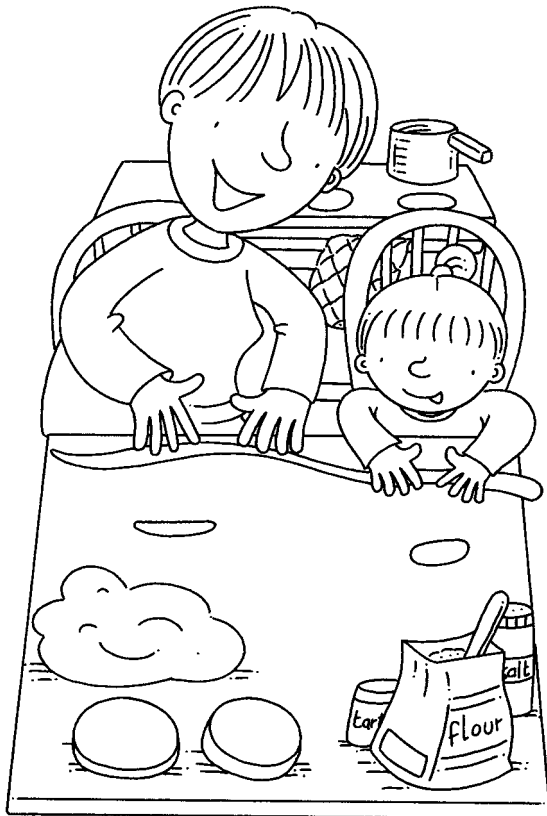
Just as a dripping tap takes time to fill a bucket so the attitudes of the general public, politicians and policy makers cannot be changed overnight. They have however been changed - and continue to do so - in the thirty years since Kathy Sylva came to work in this country. Sylva's theories are often put into practice at a policy level.

The Oxford Pre-school research project underlined the lack of clear strategic direction for services for young children and commented on the fragmentation both of provision itself and of responsibility for such provision. Its findings were highly controversial at the time since they indicated, for example, that there was insufficient difference between provision in playgroups and in nursery schools to justify the immense difference in cost. It went on to underline the disadvantaging effects of the fact that there were at that time insufficient nursery places for all three and four year olds whose parents wanted it.

Similarly Sylva's High/Scope work has also influenced practice and policy. The long-term impact of High/Scope which Sylva did much to highlight in this country (see for example her chapter in *Early Education Transformed*) was to lead to the setting up of Sure Start.

Some of the findings of the EPPE project, such as the need for sustained shared conversation, requires a re-assessment of the way in which staff work with children and can have a direct effect on practice. On the other hand, while you may have no direct control over policy decisions such as children's attendance patterns, it is important to understand and to be prepared to talk about the impact on children of policy decisions. Early years practitioners are experts

Kathy Sylva



in their field and need to feel not only entitled but obliged to let other people know what you know.

Her influence

Sylva's influence cannot be denied. She has developed research findings which underpin theories and which in turn are being put into practice. Along the way she has developed useful research techniques and found ways to make her research findings accessible to politicians and practitioners. Perhaps her most positive influence has been in enabling politicians and policy makers to understand the issues that face early years education.

Comment

Sylva's work has often attracted criticism. The publication of the Oxford Pre-school research was critical of existing practice in early childhood care and education. Her work around High/Scope was regarded by many as demonstrating her failure to understand the nature of what has been termed as 'traditional early childhood curricula' in this country. The EPPE report, although controversial amongst those

working in early childhood care and education, has been highly influential amongst policy makers and practitioners. She has brought hard-edged quantitative research methods to a field of provision that has been traditionally viewed as not open to such methods.

Sylva's long-term involvement with government has the potential to place her in a difficult position. Recommendations arising from her research about the involvement of qualified teachers in early years settings have not been as readily accepted by politicians as she would have wished. Sylva suggests that this is because it would be expensive to implement. Although the EPPE projects are all government funded she has generally managed to steer a steady course. She supports the government's record on early years but has not been afraid to challenge on issues. For example, she has challenged some of the early learning goals as overly ambitious for young children. This has been achieved against a background of research objectives which were initially distrusted by many practitioners. However, over time the research process has underlined the importance of play, conversation and social and emotional well-being. Sylva has been and remains highly influential in getting this message across to politicians - she has a voice that is heard and respected.

Points for reflection

- Why do you think that children who play might be more effective problem-solvers?
- How can (or should) practitioners help parents to improve their ratings on the Home Learning Environment scales?

References

- Play: its role in development and evolution* Jerome Bruner, A. Jolly and Kathy Sylva, (Pelican Books 1985)
- Under Fives in Britain* Jerome Bruner (Grant McIntyre 1980)
- Childwatching at Playgroup and Nursery School* Kathy Sylva (Grant McIntyre 1980)
- Assessing quality in the early years* Kathy Sylva et al (Trentham Books 2003)
- The effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project: findings from the pre-school period* Kathy Sylva et al (2003)
- Research brief: RBX15-03 (downloadable from websites shown below)
- 'The Role of Research in explaining the past and shaping the future' Kathy Sylva in *Early Education Transformed* Lesley Abbott and Helen Moylett (eds) (Falmer Press 1999)

Where to find out more

- <http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk/eppe>
www.ioe.ac.uk/projects/eppe
www.dcsf.gov.uk/research

Gender issues- educating boys and girls

PROFILE

Research findings offer conflicting reports that in various contexts and at different ages girls are underachieving or boys are underachieving. This complex area of research is difficult for practitioners to make sense of - especially as we all carry strongly held personal views about the subject.

LINKS

- *How Children Learn 3*
 - Dweck
 - Learning outdoors
 - Brain and body
 - Paley
 - Pinker
 - Moral development

Some key thinking and theories about gender

The key to understanding research about boys and girls is the nature/ nurture debate. Evolutionary psychologists, such as Steven Pinker, are likely to take a firm line on gender differences being the result of millions of years of evolution and therefore part of our nature. Those who argue that gender differences are natural point to the higher levels of dopamine, testosterone and vasopressin found in boys. They highlight too the greater blood flow found in the brains of boys and its link to physical action. Girls, on the other hand, are found to have better connections between the two halves of their brains and an earlier development of parts of the cerebral cortex.

The value of such findings is challenged. Penny Holland highlights research which shows for example that testosterone levels may not be the cause of aggression, but the result of aggressive activity. She cites neuroscientist Susan Greenfield and points out that as we find out just how sophisticated and flexible our brains are "the balance between nature and nurture seems to swing in favour of nurture" (Holland, 2003, page 17)

Social constructivists such as Barbara Rogoff are likely to suggest that the culture in which children grow up (or in other words how they are nurtured) accounts for gender differences. Rogoff (2003) argues, for example, that girls are given more guidance in 'proper social behaviour' than boys and that different tasks are usually assigned to children depending on whether they are boys or girls. In support of her argument, she cites practices in the Luo community in Kenya. In this example, although chores are usually assigned on a gender basis, where there is no older daughter, boys may be required to look after younger siblings. Those who have such experience were found to be less aggressive, more pro-social and generally more caring than those who had only taken on traditional roles.

Those who regard gender as being mainly about human nature suggest that the fact that training has little or no impact in changing behaviour amongst men and women, underlines the fact that we are fighting nature. Rogoff on the other hand suggests that children construct the stereotypes from messages we hardly know we're sending. She writes:

Children look for regularities in behaviour based on salient categories in their community. Gender is invariably a salient category.... They look for rules, and if they think they have found one, they are more narrow about its application than their elders, often overlooking examples to the contrary. (page 75)

She gives the example of one of her own daughters seeing two suited men on the television and asking what they were. When told they were professors, the child replied that they couldn't be because they were men. The only professor she knew was a woman, her mother. Similarly two-year old Edward saw a picture of someone with a stethoscope. He asked what the person was doing and was told that it was a doctor. His reply, despite the fact that his family doctor was a woman, was "she can't be a doctor, he's wearing lipstick!" The confusion over pronouns underlines his sense of confusion about the cultural rules.

Rogoff continues:

Subtle information about gender in young children's daily lives may be especially likely to be taken for granted..... Patterns that are perceived without conscious awareness or without being pointed out are especially likely to be regarded subsequently as preferable and more pleasant.....for this reason, gender roles ... (are) quite resilient and slow to change. (page 76)

Gender issues- educating boys and girls

Putting the theory into practice

Holland (2003 page 19) reminds us that young children are 'struggling to make sense of what it means to be a boy or a girl'. They are 'in the process of forming gender identity.... trying to find ...rules that will make them feel that they belong in the gendered world that surrounds them'.

Practitioners are also struggling. Parents views may differ radically from those held by practitioners and practitioners themselves may find it difficult to reconcile their personal beliefs about gender with those of others around them. Yet it is clear that children are absorbing views that we are not even aware of transmitting, so we have an important task not to limit children's life chances by promoting stereotypical behaviour.

The key to resolving this is to ensure that what we do as practitioners supports children educationally. This will have benefits for all children because in the midst of nature/ nurture debates it's important to remember that the differences between one boy and another or one girl and another are greater than the differences between boys and girls as a whole!

Supporting boys **and** girls is most likely to be effective when we:

- **Create communication -friendly environments.** Since boys' communication skills and interest in literacy is said to be less-well developed than those of girls, this is vital. Making time and space for sustained, shared conversations and creating lots of opportunities for small group interactions - with and without adults will help. It's also vital to check that while modelling language use, you're not hogging too much of the available space. There should be a balance - if you're doing more of the talking than anyone else you need to rethink
- **Support positive learning dispositions.** It's important to recognise that attitudes and habits such as perseverance, persistence, taking responsibility or communicating are vital to all learning and they should be nurtured. But we should remember that things like risk-taking (stereotypically a male behaviour) are of great value.
- **Ensure warm environments that promote a sense of security.** Some researchers (see for example Gurian) argue that boys need a greater sense of attachment to educators. This will involve adults in:
 - giving attention for positive behaviour and activities;
 - verbally mirroring what children are doing and joining in with their play;
 - following children's lead and interests;
 - being enthusiastic, predictable and consistent.

- **Promoting children's sense of independence and opportunities for making choices.** It is often noted that girls wander less and that this has an impact on their spatial awareness and, in the longer-term, their mathematical ability. Similarly it is suggested that boys seem to value a sense of freedom. Being warned about changes in activity - such as clearing up time - and being given the opportunity to make decisions wherever possible can support this.

The influence of theories about gender

Since the 1970s there has been a tidal flow of publications and research studies about the impact of gender on achievement, attitudes and behaviour. It is interesting to note Rogoff's comment that we are more comfortable with patterns of behaviour which do

War, weapon and superhero play in the early years

This is the subtitle to Penny Holland's book *We don't play with guns here*. Penny's research focused on what she terms the 'zero tolerance' for gun and weapon play in early childhood settings. Her theory is that by effectively banning what appears to be a principle interest of boys in superheroes and all that entails we are alienating them from learning. She suggests that practitioners should allow gun play providing they are guns or weapons created from construction sets or found materials. Replica weapons should not be used. By allowing this play, children are enabled to develop and transform it. Holland concludes her book with a quote from Vivian Gussin Paley:

If I have not yet learned to love Darth Vader, I have at least made some useful discoveries while watching him at play. As I interrupt less, it becomes clear that boys' play is serious drama, not morbid mischief. Its rhythms and images are often discordant to me, but I must try to make sense of a style that, after all, belongs to half the population of the classroom.



Gender issues- educating boys and girls

not challenge us or which are less than conscious. This means that comments or actions which challenge our views are not comfortable and we tend to retreat from them.

Views on gender are changing, but for many people the rate of change is too slow. This does not mean that they are not having an influence. You might also consider the view that change occurs because of extreme views that are voiced. Society might not like them but they make it easier to take on moderate change.

Comment

Throughout the history of child development and psychology, many of the views expressed have been challenged on gender grounds. Freud in particular has been heavily criticised. In relation to moral development, Kohlberg has been challenged (see moral development in this book page 79) as giving greater status to male judgements than female ones. Piaget has been criticised as offering a male view of the child (see for example Burman). Bowlby was criticised for his views on attachment which seemed to demand that mothers, but not fathers, needed to be with their child throughout their early years.

More recent work which focuses on gender differences is not however above criticism. This is not surprising when it is clear that there are strongly held views on both sides of the nature vs. nurture debate. However, one criticism may be levelled at Michael Gurian in particular. He writes:

Impulsivity used to be much more useful and desirable in learning, especially when children did more of their learning outdoors and independently (Gurian and Stevens 2005 page 49)

This is very worrying since it implies that approaches to learning can be changed at whim. As we have seen, risk-taking remains vital to learning. Conformity has been seen as the enemy of girls' achievement since it robs them of impulsivity - yet Gurian seems to be suggesting that the change he notes in teaching is acceptable. Outdoor learning and independent learning remain essential and it is the role of practitioners to ensure that children have opportunities to both be taught and to learn in these ways.

A further criticism may be addressed to those purporting to support the development of boys and girls. Featherstone and Bayley repeatedly emphasise the need for boys to have 'brain breaks'. Educators only need to offer formal 'brain breaks' if their approach to teaching and learning does not enable and trust children to gauge when they need breaks. Enforced breaks - no matter how well-meaning - can undermine concentration.

Points for reflection

- Have you (like Penny Holland and Vivian Gussin Paley) learned to love superheroes? What did you discover about boys' play?
- Have you noticed any challenges to your views on gender which have felt uncomfortable? Reflect on why this might be.

References

The Cultural Nature of Human Development, Barbara Rogoff (Oxford University Press 2003)
We don't play with guns here - war, weapon and superhero play in the early years Penny Holland (Open University Press 2003)
Boys and Girls Come Out to Play Sally Featherstone and Ros Bayley (A&C Black 2005)
The Minds of Boys Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens (Jossey Bass 2005)

Where to find out more

Boys and girls: superheroes in the doll corner Vivian Gussin Paley (University of Chicago Press 1984)
Who's calling the shots? Nancy Carlsson Paige and Diane Levin (New Society 1990)
Boys and girls learn differently! Michael Gurian (Jossey-Bass 2001)
Racism, gender identities and young children Paul Connolly (Routledge 1998)
We don't play with guns here: war, weapon and superhero play in the early years Penny Holland (OUP 2003)