

Perceptions of child care: a cross-national comparison

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Our researchers examined five questions

1. How do parents in Germany and America value aspects of professionally defined early childhood education (ECE) quality?

There is remarkable similarity with regard to which quality characteristics American and German parents indicated as being more or less important. The similar importance is not only seen in the highest- and lowest-scoring items, but holds true to a great extent across all items.

2. Do parents assess the quality of their children's preschool early childhood programs similarly?

German parents give consistently lower quality scores to the programs their children attend than do U.S. parents. All differences are significant except for one item (furnishings for relaxation and comfort), which is assessed identically in both countries.

3. What is the relationship between parental importance ratings and quality scores in the two countries?

In both countries importance and quality ratings are positively and significantly related. Thus, as mothers value a quality characteristic as being more important, they also tend to assess their child's program as doing better on that characteristic.

4. When comparing parents' assessments of quality with those of trained observers, are results across countries similar?

In both countries, parents' quality scores were substantially higher than those of trained observers, who spent hours observing each classroom. The variance that parental and external quality assessments have in common does not exceed 10% and is usually far less.

5. To what extent do demographic variables, parent perceptions of quality, or national background explain the scores parents assign to the quality of their children's classrooms or to the differences between parent and external observer quality scores?

For mothers with higher education, small differences between their quality ratings and those of external observers can be observed. Mothers and external observers differ in the USA more than in the German samples, although the variance explained by each model is relatively low.

Abstract

This study compares how parents in Germany and the USA perceive the quality of early childhood education (ECE) services their preschoolers receive in the two different cultures and the ECE systems existing in the countries.

The sample included 2,407 parents in the USA and 392 in Germany. Classroom quality was assessed by trained observers using the USA and Germany versions of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS).

Parents' perceptions of ECE programs were measured with a parent questionnaire (ECERSPQ), which is an adaptation of the ECERS.

Findings show that in both countries

- parents indicate high importance for the aspects of quality required in the ECER/ECERSPQ,
- parents assign substantially higher quality scores to their children's classrooms than do trained observers, and
- parent quality assessments are influenced by the relative importance they attributed to aspects of quality.

In Germany, parental choice of ECE is based on educational preferences and what is available in neighborhood, rather than what is affordable. The fees that all German parents pay for ECE services are based on a subsidized sliding scale, in an attempt to make programs available at an affordable cost to all families. Prices are comparable through the country with some

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This *Snapshot* is based on the article "Parents' perceptions of their children's child care: a cross-national comparison" by Debby Cryer of the FPG Child Development Institute at UNC-Chapel Hill, and Wolfgang Tietze and Holger Wessels, both of Freie Universitaet, Berlin, Germany. It was published in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 2002, vol. 17, pp. 259-277.

Discussion

Parents' overestimation of quality is likely due to a variety of factors. First, in neither country do parents spend substantial amounts of time observing what happens in their children's ECE programs.

Second, although the two systems for child care and education are different in structure, parents in both are limited in terms of making choices—in Germany by limited places in neighborhood programs, and in the USA, more by what they can afford.

Third, requirements for caring for children in centers are quite different from caring for children at home. It is likely that many parents would not know the specifics required for caring for groups of children. Thus, parents and trained observers may operate from differing bases of knowledge when evaluating quality.

Finally, our findings show a relationship between parent importance scores and the quality scores they assign. They assign higher quality scores to aspects of care that they think are more important.

Abstract

(continued from other side)

variation between states.

The center-based preschool ECE in the USA is typified by great variation in both sponsorship and quality. Early childhood center-based programs are offered by a mixed economic market and programs are provided under many different arrangements. There are profit, non-profit and public supplies, offering many different types of services and representing varied educational curricular approaches. Regulation of programs varies substantially by state, with very stringent regulatory standards in some states and less demanding standards in others.

In Germany, the ECE system has been established with little influence of an economic market system, but rather an emphasis on supporting families in caring for and educating their young children.

Implications

To strengthen the parents' role in selecting high quality ECE for their children several steps might be taken.

First, more in-depth information on quality might be provided to parents. Parents may value the same indicators of quality for their children, but may not actually know the definitions used to specify these indicators in a group setting.

Even with the knowledge about what is required for high quality ECE programs, parents would still need the opportunity to apply the knowledge. To help parents, it might be considered that employers provide time away from work for parents to observe their children's classroom.

Making available external judgments of quality might be the most effective approach to informing parents about the relative quality of different programs. This can be accomplished by informing parents about the accreditation status of programs or through rated-licensing systems that indicate the quality of the programs.

The best possibilities for ensuring high quality early childhood experiences are most likely found in a cooperative effort.

If you want to know more

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