Pre-school benefits all, and influences the nation's well-being

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There are great differences in health and development linked to social origins. Poor children are more likely to fail at school, have poorer health, and engage in crime and other problem behaviour later in life (e.g., Holzer, et al., 2007). Despite decades of social, educational and public health reform, there has been little progress in equalising opportunities. The impact of social origins on wellbeing is persisting, and even increasing. The consequence of these inequalities is an enormous waste of talent. The potential contribution to society of individuals who grow up in disadvantage is far greater than that often realised. There is also an extra load on society’s resources as the disadvantaged have greater need for state resources throughout their lives. There is both a moral imperative – how to reduce inequality and make peoples’ lives more fulfilled, and a social and economic imperative – as societies with more disadvantage and poorer skills are less able to adapt to a world demanding higher levels of skills. The aims of equality and future productivity merge in that, if we recognise that learning capabilities are primarily formed during the early years, and act to improve life chances, we can serve both goals.

Countries vary enormously in their provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Almost every developed country has some form of early childhood education for children below school age. The differences lie in organisation, state subsidy, responsible authorities and the age of provision. In some countries, public authorities offer subsidised ECEC places from a very early age, e.g., end of maternity leave, for others only in the year before school. However the ECEC provided is often poor quality and not tailored to optimise children’s development. ECEC must be of adequate quality if it is to produce benefits for children.

The assumption behind much policy in the developed world has been that equalising educational opportunity would itself eliminate the effect of poverty on wellbeing, with no need to alter income distribution. Research on inter-generational mobility indicates that does not happen. In many countries (e.g., US, UK, France, Australia) the association between parental income and
their children's income (as adults) is exceptionally strong; whereas, in Nordic countries, social inheritance effects are substantially weaker than in other countries. Esping-Andersen (2004) argues that the success of Nordic countries in breaking the link between parental attainment and children's outcomes is linked to the provision of universal and high-quality ECEC. He notes that the period when inequality in children's cognitive attainment decreased corresponds to the period when universal ECEC came into place. Also experience in Finland suggests that polarization of child outcomes can be minimised even when the average performance is very high.

Several studies document how the benefits of ECEC for long-term educational, occupational and social outcomes for disadvantaged children persist into adulthood (Barnett, 1992, Reynolds, et al., 2011). Such programmes are cost-effective in that the savings outweigh the costs (Heckman, 2006). The benefits in adulthood include those relating to incomes, status, health and crime, and extend to subsequent generations through the impact of parents on their children's education. General population studies find benefits for school readiness are greater if pre-school started between two and three years of age (Loeb, et al., 2007). A meta-analysis of 125 early education studies in the USA (Camilli, et al., 2010) found that early childhood education was associated with substantial benefits for cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes. Pre-school programmes appeared more effective if they emphasised children's educational experiences.

The effects associated with ECEC provision are long-term. Studies have associated attending a pre-school with increased qualifications, employment, and earnings up to age 33 (Goodman & Sianesi, 2005). In France, pre-school (école maternelle) is universal, free education from age three. During the 1960s and 1970s, large-scale expansion led to the proportion of three-year-olds enrolled increasing from 35% to 90%, and of four-year-olds from 60% to 100%. Government data reveals persistent effects, with pre-school helping children to succeed in school and obtain higher wages in the labour market, with reduced socio-economic inequalities, as less advantaged children benefitted more than the more advantaged (Dumas & Lefranc, 2010). Likewise, in Switzerland, pre-school expansion improved inter-generational educational mobility, as disadvantaged children benefitted most (Bauer & Riphahn, 2009). In Norway, differential implementation of pre-schools by municipalities revealed that pre-school was associated with strong benefits for later educational and occupational outcomes (Havnes & Mogstad, 2009).

Similar evidence exists outside the developed world. Pre-school has been shown to boost primary school achievement in Bangladesh (Aboud, 2006) with similar results being reported for ten other countries (Montie, Xiang, & Schweinhart, 2006). Examination of pre-school expansion in Uruguay and Argentina has also revealed clear benefits in terms of improved educational attainment (Berlinksi, Galiani, & Manacorda, 2008; Berlinksi, Galiani, & Gertler, 2009). The benefits associated with high quality ECEC are wide-ranging, covering cognitive, educational and social development, but just providing any child care or pre-school education is not enough. Studies from the USA (Vandell, et al., 2010), England (Melhuish, et al., 2008; Sammons, et al., 2012), Northern Ireland (Melhuish, et al., 2013), and Denmark (Bauchmüller, Görtz, & Rasmussen, 2011) indicate that the quality of pre-school is critical for longer-term beneficial effects. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) examined data for 65 countries. It found that literacy at age 15 was strongly associated with pre-school participation in countries where a large proportion of the population use it, where it is used for more months, and where there were measures to maintain its quality. The OECD concluded that widening access to pre-school can improve performance and reduce socioeconomic disparities, so long as extending coverage did not compromise quality (OECD, 2011).

Implementation is key to the success of any service. For example, it is of little help having a hospital that cannot provide effective medical treatment. Similarly, a pre-school that does not provide children with experiences that foster their development is useless. Hence, the key to the provision of high quality early childhood education and care is the structuring of the environment to optimise the experiences of children and foster their development. It is not good enough to provide pre-school; it needs to be of adequate quality.

Conclusion
In a technologically sophisticated world, a population's educational attainment is likely to be increasingly important for a nation's economic development. The available evidence indicates the benefits of universal provision of pre-school education. It can advance the school readiness and later attainment of children, and support their subsequent social, economic and occupational success (for a review, see Melhuish, et al., 2015). Hence, as a population's skills are essential for economic development, universal pre-school can be seen as part of the infrastructure for economic development in a successful economy.

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lead article


About the author

Edward Melhuish is Professor of Human Development at the University of Oxford, and a visiting professor at the University of Wollongong. He was involved with the National Evaluation of Sure Start, the Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project and the Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) project and is currently undertaking studies in Norway, European Community, UK, and Australia. Melhuish has 300 publications and his research influenced the 1989 Children Act, the 2003 Children Act, 2006 Childcare Bill and policy on childcare, early education, child poverty and parental support in the UK and other countries.

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