



EFFECTIVE PRE-SCHOOL PROVISION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Key findings over the pre-school period

Impact of attending a pre-school

- ◆ Pre-school experience enhances cognitive and social development in all children.
- ◆ Full-time attendance had no benefits for cognitive development at the start of primary school compared to part-time provision.
- ◆ Disadvantaged children benefit even more where they are with a mixture of children from different social backgrounds.

Does type of pre-school matter?

- ◆ There are significant differences between pre-school settings and their impact on children. Nursery schools/classes have the overall best outcomes, with good outcomes also for playgroups. Other types of pre-school produce benefits but to a lesser extent.

Effects of quality and specific 'practices' in pre-school

- ◆ High quality pre-schooling is related to better intellectual and social/behavioural development for children.
- ◆ Observed quality within pre-school settings was higher in nursery schools and classes.
- ◆ Staff training and qualifications are associated with better quality of provision.

The importance of home learning

- ◆ For all children, the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. What parents do is more important than who parents are.

Key findings at the end of Key Stage 1

Enduring effects

- ◆ Advantageous effects of pre-school were evident throughout Key Stage 1, with some reduction in strength for some outcomes compared to school entry.

Type of pre-school

- ◆ Type of pre-school was related to longer-term effects with effects most strong for nursery schools and classes, with playgroups closely following, and less long-lasting effects for other types of pre-school.

Quality of pre-school

- ◆ Pre-school quality was significantly related to children's development over the first four years of primary school.

1. BACKGROUND

The Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) project began in 1998, at a time when early years policy was a 'backwater' that was ripe for attention. The Rumbold Report¹ highlighted the potential for pre-school education to give children a better start at school. This was followed by the Start Right Report², which made a convincing case for the mid- and long-term effects of early education on motivational as well as academic outcomes. However what was needed was strong longitudinal evidence on the effects of pre-school on children's developmental outcomes. In 1997 the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study was commissioned in England, and EPPNI as a sister project was started in Northern Ireland in 1998. Both EPPE and EPPNI are 'value added' longitudinal studies of the effects of pre-school experience upon children's development, and both were designed to produce evidence that could be used to inform policy and practice.

Since 1997 the UK government has been consistently committed to expanding early years services. There are two thrusts to this commitment: (a) the need to prepare all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, for the demands of entering primary school, and (b) the contribution of child care to helping workless families move out of poverty and into paid employment. Both of these aims sit well with the social inclusion and raising standards agenda. Each of the constituent countries within the UK has pursued early years policy in different ways.

1 Department of Education & Science (1990). *The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Quality of the Educational Experience offered to 3- and 4-year olds* (Rumbold, A). London: HMSO.

2 Ball, C. (1994) *Startright: The Importance of Early Learning*, London: RSA.

2. PREVIOUS PRE-SCHOOL RESEARCH

Much research on early education is American. Two studies cited often are the Abecedarian Project³ and the Perry Pre-school Project⁴. Both used randomised control trials to demonstrate lasting effects of high quality early intervention. These landmark studies, begun in the 1970s, were focussed on high quality pre-school as a form of intervention for disadvantaged children, and have been followed by further randomised control trials and cohort studies⁵. This literature points to the many positive effects of centre-based care and education. Attention has turned away from establishing simple effects of early education and towards an understanding of the familial and educational processes underlying change in development. It is important for current research to take into account aspects of the child's home environment because children's outcomes are the joint product of home and pre-school and any research on the effects of early education will have to take into account home influences. This was a major element of the EPPNI research.

There is a UK tradition of variation in pre-school provision both between types (eg playgroup, nursery classes) and in different parts of the country. Several reports have questioned whether Britain's pre-school education is as effective as it might be and have urged better co-ordination of services and research into the impact of different forms of provision. Yet there has been little large-scale, systematic research on the effects of early childhood education in the UK. The 'Start Right' Enquiry recommended rigorous longitudinal studies with baseline measures so that the 'value added' to children's development by pre-school education could be established. EPPNI has responded to this with a 'value added' design. Before EPPE and EPPNI little research in the UK had explored whether some forms of provision have greater benefits than others.

3 Ramey, C. T. and Ramey, S. L. (1998), 'Early intervention & early experience'. *American Psychologist*, 53, 109-120.

4 Schweinhart, L. J. & Weikart, D. P., (1997) *Lasting Differences, The High/Scope preschool curriculum comparison through age 23*. High/Scope Press, Ypsilanti, Michigan.

5 Melhuish, E. C. (2004). *A literature review of the impact of early years provision upon young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds*. Report to the Comptroller and Auditor General. London: National Audit Office.

The EPPE and EPPNI projects are the first large-scale UK studies on the effects of different kinds of pre-school provision. Both projects studied the effects of pre-school experience and the effects of family support for children's learning at home. To understand children's development it is necessary to take both into account.

Issues of particular relevance to policy are:

- 1 Does pre-school experience produce benefits for children?
- 2 Do early effects 'fade' over time?
- 3 Does type of pre-school education matter?
- 4 What are the characteristics of effective pre-school provision?

EPPNI provides information relevant to these questions in Northern Ireland as the EPPE project does for England.

3. THE EPPNI STUDY

The Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) project investigated the effects of pre-school education and care on children's development for children aged 3-8 years old. The EPPNI team collected a wide range of information on over 800 children who were studied longitudinally until the end of Key Stage 1. Data were collected on children's developmental profiles (at ages 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 years), background characteristics related to their parents, the child's home learning environment, and the pre-school settings children attended. Eighty pre-school settings were drawn from a range of providers (nursery schools/classes, playgroups, private day nurseries, reception classes and reception groups). A sample of 'home' children, (who had no or minimal pre-school experience) were recruited to the study at entry to school for comparison with the pre-school group. In addition EPPNI explored the characteristics of pre-school practice through three intensive case studies of settings with observed good quality. This research summary is based upon the empirical work published in 13 Technical Papers. EPPNI has produced rigorous and persuasive data for policy makers and practitioners.

4. KEY FINDINGS OVER THE PRE-SCHOOL PERIOD

4.1 Impact of attending a pre-school

Pre-school experience, compared to none, enhances all-round development for all children. Having allowed for any differences in background factors that might affect development, 'home' children (those who had little or no pre-school experience) show poorer cognitive and social/behavioural outcomes at entry to school and at the end of Year 1 than those who attended pre-school. Also they are more likely 'at risk' of developing some form of special educational needs (SEN).

4.2 Does type of pre-school matter?

There are significant differences between pre-school settings and their impact on children. Nursery schools/classes have the overall best outcomes with good outcomes also for playgroups. Other types of pre-school produce benefits but to a lesser extent. Good quality can be found across all types of early years settings; however, quality was higher overall in nursery schools and classes. The EPPNI project has compared children from each of the types of pre-school provision with children with very little or no pre-school centre experience (home group). In these comparisons a wide range of child, parent, socio-economic, home, family and early childcare variables have been included in analyses so that comparisons take place on a fair basis, ie "a level playing field". At the start of primary school children from nursery school/classes showed the most benefit for cognitive development and children from reception groups showed no cognitive advantage over the home group. For social development children from playgroups showed the most advantage with all pre-school groups showing some advantage. A summary of overall benefits for the different pre-school groups compared with the home group is shown for cognitive and social development outcomes in Table 1.

Table 1: Overall developmental benefits associated with pre-school type at the start of primary school as compared with children with no pre-school experience

Developmental Benefit	Nursery school/class	Playgroup	Private Day Nursery	Reception Class	Reception Group
Cognitive Development	3	1	2	2	0
Social Development	1	3	1	1	2

4.3 Full-time versus part-time attendance

Full-time attendance had no benefits for cognitive development at the start of primary school compared to part-time provision.

4.4 Duration

No effects of duration were found at the start of primary school. The duration of attendance at pre-school was consistently found to be associated with better outcomes in the EPPE study in England, with every month of pre-school experience after age 2 years linked to better intellectual development and improved independence, concentration and sociability. However similar effects for duration were not found in the EPPNI study and this is likely to be because a lower level of variation in duration of pre-school was found in Northern Ireland than in England.

4.5 Effects of quality of pre-school

High quality pre-schooling is related to better intellectual and social/behavioural development for children. Good quality can be found across all types of early years settings. However quality was higher overall in nursery schools and nursery classes.

The quality of provision is likely to be affected by staff qualifications and training. The comparison of observed quality in playgroups between Northern Ireland and England strongly suggests that improved staff training can improve quality of pre-school provision. Also the higher levels of observed quality and better child outcomes for nursery schools/classes are likely to be related to higher staff qualifications in these centres.

4.6 Vulnerable children

There are a range of multiple disadvantages associated with children 'at risk' of learning or behavioural difficulties. These disadvantages include prematurity, low birthweight, more than three siblings, lower parent education and socio-economic status, and poorer home learning environment. Also such children are more likely to show developmental or behavioural difficulties in infancy. Children 'at risk' of learning or behavioural difficulties are helped by pre-school experience and the effects are greater the better the quality of the pre-school. Where disadvantaged

children attended centres that included children from mixed social backgrounds they showed further benefit than if they attended centres containing predominantly disadvantaged children.

4.7 The importance of home learning

For all children, the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. What parents do is more important than who parents are.

5. KEY FINDINGS AT THE END OF KEY STAGE 1

5.1 Enduring effects

The beneficial effects of pre-school remained evident throughout Key Stage 1, although some outcomes were not as strong as they had been at school entry. The most likely explanation for the diminishing 'pre-school effect' is the influence of the primary school on children's development. By the end of Key Stage 1 (age 8 years) the attainment gap is still evident for reading and mathematics, and was still evident at 7 years of age for some aspects of social development (eg the pre-school group were consistently less anxious).

5.2 Type of pre-school

The effects present at the end of Key Stage 1 are present most strongly for children from nursery schools and classes, slightly less so for children from playgroups, less again for children from reception classes, but have largely disappeared for children from private day nurseries and reception groups.

The effects vary for different outcomes and for different periods in primary school. However it is possible to produce an index of overall benefit for cognitive and for social behavioural outcomes by summing all the positive effects and subtracting any negative effects separately for cognitive and social outcomes over the first four years of primary school. Table 2 shows the result of this aggregation.

For cognitive outcomes the children from nursery school/classes show the most benefit followed by the children from playgroups, then children from private day

nurseries and reception classes, with children from reception groups showing no overall cognitive benefit.

For social/behavioural outcomes, children from nursery school/classes and playgroups show equivalent benefit, with children from the other types of pre-school showing a minimal advantage over the home group.

Table 2: Overall developmental benefits associated with pre-school type for first four years of primary school as compared with children with no pre-school experience

Developmental Benefit	Nursery school/class	Playgroup	Private Day Nursery	Reception Class	Reception Group
Cognitive Development	15	10	2	2	0
Social Development	9	9	2	1	2

5.3 Full-time versus part-time attendance at pre-school

At every stage of the study the possibility that there would be differences associated with full-time versus part-time attendance at pre-school was examined. For most comparisons there were no differences between children who had full-time or part-time pre-school. This result mirrors results in the EPPE study in England. There were a few differences in some aspects of social development, but these differences in progress appeared to reflect one group catching up with the other as there were usually no differences in attainment.

5.4 Duration

There were small benefits for social development found at the end of P1 and P2 for higher duration of pre-school attendance in EPPNI.

5.5 Quality of pre-school

The observed quality of pre-school centres is related to better intellectual/cognitive and social/behavioural development in children throughout the first four years of primary school. The effects diminish with time in primary school but there still some pre-school effects at the end of Key Stage 1 (age 8 years).

While examples of good quality can be found across all types of early years settings, the EPPNI results found that quality was higher overall in nursery schools and nursery classes. The quality of provision is related to staff qualifications and training. The comparison of observed quality in playgroups between Northern Ireland and England and also the relatively better child outcomes for playgroups in Northern Ireland strongly suggests that improved staff training can improve quality of pre-school provision, as these relatively better results for playgroups in Northern Ireland may reflect the higher levels of staff training in Northern Ireland playgroups. Also the higher levels of observed quality and better child outcomes for nursery schools/classes are likely to be related to the higher staff qualifications in these pre-school centres.

5.6 Vulnerable children

Some children continued to be 'at risk' of special educational needs at the end of Key Stage 1, with more of the 'home' children falling into this group even after taking into account background factors. This indicates the benefits of pre-school experience as a protective factor for children's future development. Multiple disadvantage continued to have an effect.

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The quality of the learning environment at home (where parents are actively engaged in activities with children) promoted intellectual and social development in all children. Although parents' social class and levels of education were related to child outcomes the quality of the home learning environment was more important and only moderately associated with social class or mothers' qualification levels. What parents do is more important than who they are. Hence pre-school settings that do not include parent support/education are missing an important element in enhancing social and behavioural development.

What parents and carers do makes a real difference to young children's development. The EPPNI project used an index of the quality of the home learning environment (HLE). There is a range of activities that parents undertake with pre-school children that promotes their development. For example, reading with the child, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, teaching the alphabet and numbers, taking

children on visits and creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends at home, were all associated with higher intellectual and social/behavioural scores. These activities could also be viewed as 'protective' factors in reducing SEN because children whose parents engaged regularly in home learning activities were less likely to be at risk for special educational needs. The home learning environment was only moderately associated with parents' educational or occupational level and was more strongly associated with children's intellectual and social development than either parental education or occupation. In other words what parents do with their children is more important than who parents are. Low income parents with few qualifications can improve their children's progress and give them a better start at school by engaging in activities at home that engage and stretch the child's mind. This EPPNI finding has implications for the work in programmes such as Sure Start that target areas of high social disadvantage.

EPPNI demonstrated a strong relationship between children's outcomes and parental factors but this was somewhat weaker for child social/behavioural development than for cognitive development. Research has consistently indicated that there are strong associations between certain factors related to disadvantage (such as low socio-economic status or SES, low income, mothers' educational levels etc.) and children's poor intellectual attainment at school. However, few large-scale research studies have been able to explore the wide range of background factors considered in the EPPNI study, especially daily activities in the home.

7. THE INFLUENCE OF EARLY CHILDCARE

The parental interviews discussed childcare 'history' before their children entered the study. This revealed that non-parental childcare before three years of age had some effects. High levels of 'group care' before the age of three (and particularly before the age of two) were associated with slightly higher levels of anti-social behaviour for a small group of children when assessed at age three, and at later ages.

8. REVEALING PRACTICE THROUGH CASE STUDIES

Significantly, the case studies have shown how diverse early years settings are. They show that there is no 'level playing field' in terms of the training of staff, staff salaries and conditions of service, adult-child ratios, resources or accommodation. The three EPPNI case studies identified four areas that are important when working with children aged 3 to 5 years.

8.1 Management and staff

The case studies revealed strong leadership and long-serving staff in each of the centres. In all settings the strong leadership was characterised by a strong philosophy for the setting, which was shared by everyone working in the setting. Also a high level of commitment to staff development and training was considered important and supported. Staff at each of the pre-school settings held a range of vocational and academic qualifications.

8.2 Ethos and Emotional Climate of the Settings

Common themes related to good quality provision emerged. All the centres had a warm, caring, safe, secure and supportive approach to their children. Children were generally treated with respect and the centres were warm and inviting places with staff appearing calm and engaged with the children. Resources and available space varied between type of centre, including the outdoor environments and equipment.

8.3 Parental partnership

Communication to parents varied among the three centres and included open days, notice boards, prospectuses, monthly newsletters, and a booklet outlining activities for the children, the role of parents and staff and the aims of the centre. At all three centres parents were made to feel that they could talk informally to staff about problems at any time, and parents regularly received informal reports concerning their child's progress, and formal meetings were arranged if necessary. Overall, parental attitudes towards these three centres were positive. Parents of children generally expressed the opinion that staff seemed to care about the children and that the children were safe and happy in their respective centre.

8.4 Pedagogy

Play was a central tenet of practice at all three centres, with a variety of activities being available for children. At all of the centres the quality of interactions was generally of high quality. The range of questioning to children was appropriate with both closed and open-ended questions being utilised. At all three centres opportunities to extend learning were taken and independence was encouraged with children being able to choose and carry out some activities on their own. At all three centres it was the role of the staff to provide a safe, warm, loving environment where children could play and learn. Children at all three centres generally worked at their own level and at their own pace using a wide variety of resources.

8.5 Case studies from EPPE in England

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project is a linked project in England. Extensive case studies were undertaken in England but the selection of case studies differed between England and Northern Ireland. In the EPPE project, the case studies were chosen retrospectively on the basis of analyses of their child outcome data, and the most effective centres compared with less effective ones⁶. From these EPPE case studies several recommendations for practice can be derived, including the following.

- ◆ Encourage episodes of ‘sustained shared thinking’ with the children.
- ◆ Work towards an equal balance of child and adult initiated activity.
- ◆ Ensure staff have curriculum knowledge as well as knowledge and understanding of child development.
- ◆ Improve the child development content of both initial and continuing professional development courses.
- ◆ Aim at a good proportion of trained teachers or equivalents on the staff.

6 Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Taggart, B., Sammons, P., Melhuish, E. and Elliot, K. (2003). *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Technical Paper 10 - Intensive Case Studies of Practice across the Foundation Stage*. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London.

- ◆ Engage parents in their children’s learning and share educational aims with them.
- ◆ Encourage behaviour policies where staff support children’s behaviour management through reasoning and talk.

9. EPPNI findings in the context of other research

The similarity of findings elsewhere as well as the EPPE results increase confidence in EPPNI findings. Other areas in which the EPPNI findings are supported elsewhere include:

- ◆ Positive effects of pre-school education have been shown conclusively in the U.S., Sweden, Norway, Germany, Canada, England and New Zealand.
- ◆ The effects of greater staff training/qualifications have been shown internationally⁷ and in England (EPPE⁸).
- ◆ The contribution of quality to children’s developmental progress has been shown in many studies⁷, often using the ECERS observational scale.
- ◆ The findings on disadvantage are the basis of policy initiatives all over the world⁹.
- ◆ EPPNI is one of few studies, EPPE in England being another, to demonstrate the role of pre-school education as an effective means of early intervention in SEN.

7 Melhuish, E. C. (2004). *A literature review of the impact of early years provision upon young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Report to the Comptroller and Auditor General. London: National Audit Office.*

8 Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2004). *Effective Pre-school Provision. London: Institute of Education.*

9 Young, M. E. (1996). *Early Child Development: Investing in the Future. Washington DC: World Bank*

10. USING RESEARCH TO INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE

This study has demonstrated the positive effects of high quality pre-school provision on children's intellectual and social behavioural development up to the end of Key Stage 1 in primary school. The EPPNI research indicates that pre-school can play an important part in combating social exclusion and promoting inclusion by offering disadvantaged children, in particular, a better start to primary school. The findings indicate pre-school has a positive impact on children's progress over and above important family influences.

The results show that type of pre-school centre is important, and indicate that better outcomes are associated with certain forms of provision. Quality of pre-school is also associated with more positive child outcomes. Likewise, the research points to the separate and significant influence of the home learning environment. These aspects (type and quality of pre-school, and home learning environment) are likely to be more susceptible to change through policy and practitioner initiatives than other characteristics, such as socio-economic status.

The project provides clear evidence of the benefits of pre-school education for children in Northern Ireland, and that children benefit more from nursery school, nursery class or playgroup than from other types of pre-school provision. These types of provision should be expanded in their coverage of the population rather than other types of provision. The public provision of reception classes and reception groups is associated with a low level of benefit and governmental expenditure would achieve more for the children of Northern Ireland were resources redirected to the provision of nursery school, nursery class or playgroup provision for children currently receiving pre-school provision via reception classes or groups. Private day nurseries in Northern Ireland also do not provide as much measurable benefit for children's development as do nursery school, nursery class or playgroup.

In addition to the benefits for cognitive and social development, the report also draws attention to the reduction of 'at risk' status of developing Special Educational Needs that is associated with good quality pre-school provision. This strengthens the economic case for good quality pre-school provision for all children as SEN is expensive in terms of individuals' development and public finances. Specific proposals related to vulnerable children include:

- ◆ Increasing the take-up of pre-school places by parents who would not usually send their children to pre-school (usually found in geographical

clusters) would provide vulnerable groups of children with a better start to school and reduce their risk of developing SEN.

- ◆ Pre-school and school staff should be aware that boys may be at increased 'risk' of developing SEN for cognitive development and aspects of social development. Increased focus on the specific needs of boys, as learners, linked with appropriate staff development may have long-term benefits and help reduce the male/female gap in SEN.
- ◆ Fostering active parental engagement with children and involvement in play activities that promote children's language, spatial skills and creativity, in particular, are likely to benefit children's subsequent cognitive and social development and attainment at school.
- ◆ The strong links between 'at risk' status and multiple disadvantage indicate that ways of effectively targeting additional resources to pre-schools and schools that serve high proportions of multiply disadvantaged families should be explored.

The linked project in England (EPPE) has become well known for its contribution to 'evidence based policy' in early years education and care, and the EPPNI findings could be used similarly. The findings of EPPNI and EPPE are robust because they are based on sound and innovative research methods and the implications for policy are substantial at national, regional and local level. EPPNI set out to contribute to the debate about the education and care of young children, and the EPPNI research has targeted issues that could 'make a difference' to the lives of young children and their families.

11. METHODOLOGY

EPPNI used the following sources of information: standardised child assessments taken over time, child social/behavioural profiles completed by pre-school and primary staff, parental interviews, interviews with pre-school centre staff, quality rating scales and case study observations and interviews.

Many sources of data have been used in statistical analyses to explore the 'value added' by pre-school after taking account of a range of child, parent and home background factors. EPPNI studied a range of different types of pre-schools and 800+ children from differing social backgrounds across Northern Ireland. An

important element in the study has been to ensure that fair comparison can be made between individual settings and types of provision. Similarly, the study has taken into account the contribution to children's development of background factors such as birth weight, sex, parental qualification/occupations and the home learning environment. The pre-school effects reported in this paper are therefore 'net' of child and family factors. Only by taking account of background influences can fair comparison be made across settings.

EPPNI researchers first assessed children at three to four years old when they joined the study. Assessments were undertaken to create a profile of each child's intellectual and social/behavioural development (their attainment) using standardised instruments along with reports from the pre-school worker who knew the child best. Children were assessed again at entry to school and analyses were carried out to compare children's progress, taking into account the range of background factors referred to above. Further assessments were carried out at the end of Years 1, 2, 3, and 4 of primary school.

12. THE PROJECT

The research was undertaken by a team of researchers from the University of London, the University of Oxford, and Stranmillis University College, Belfast. The project was funded by the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and from an interdepartmental budget. The cost of the project was £647,132.

13. REPORTS

A 69-page summary report by Edward Melhuish, Louise Quinn, Karen Hanna, Kathy Sylva, Pam Sammons, Iram Siraj-Blatchford and Brenda Taggart is available on the Department of Education website at www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg.htm

In addition a series of technical papers has been published by Stranmillis University Press: these are listed in Appendix 3 of the summary report.

This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.

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