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EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION: THE IMPACT OF QUALITY ON INEQUALITY

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Early Childhood Care and Education: The Impact of Quality on Inequality

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Abstract – Public investments in early childhood care and education provisions (henceforth also referred to as childcare or daycare) have increased significantly in recent decades, in both developed and developing countries. Such quantitative extensions take, for example, the form of lowering compulsory schooling ages, introducing rights to a place in daycare for children at earlier ages and broadening the coverage of provisions to wider groups of children. The extension of non-parental childcare supply follows a massive growth in demand for those services. Three major trends are promoting demand for childcare services. Firstly, female emancipation in the labour market has increased maternal employment, resulting in an increased need for non-parental childcare. Secondly, while having seen considerable GDP growth since World War II, many countries still report high or even increasing child poverty rates, whereas inequalities in child outcomes emerge already in the early years. Children with single parents and without income earners in their household are especially exposed to the risk of growing up and being trapped in disadvantageous environments, requiring public investments to guarantee equality of opportunity. And thirdly, economic progress has been accompanied by significant demographic changes, reducing the number of children born. The resulting imbalance in the age structure, paired with the need for a well-trained workforce for the future's knowledge-intensive economies, urges governments to make investments that assure that no child falls behind.

Keywords: Childhood Care, Education, Inequality, Quality, Public, investments, developed, countries, growth, services, employment, etc.

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INTRODUCTION

In addition, early childhood is increasingly recognised as the crucial period to stimulate child development and thus improve chances to do well in later schooling and the labour market (Esping-Andersen, *et. al.*, 2011. Dustmann, *et. al.*, 2012. Dumas, & Lefranc, 2010. Dronkers, 2010). Public investments in early childhood provisions are expected to lead to substantial social returns.

A few countries, such as, for example, Denmark, have already approached a near universal childcare coverage for children from a few months after birth; others, like the India, are following swiftly. Yet, many countries still do not manage to provide the quantity and quality of childcare provisions that are deemed necessary to address the increased demand. Stronger orientation in most countries to fiscal consolidation and performance-oriented budgeting requires that funds are addressed to the most effective social investments. A lack of sufficient evidence on the importance and adequate quality of public investments in childcare provisions reduces the readiness of policymakers to allocate sufficient public funds to the childcare sector (Dickens, *et. al.*, 2006. Deming, 2009.

Berlinski, *et. al.*, 2008). At the same time, policymakers try to serve the excess demand for childcare services by increasing the quantity of childcare places rather than promoting the quality of services. However, evidence on the effectiveness of childcare provisions is particularly weak with respect to quality aspects. This makes it more likely that public childcare investments turn out to be ineffective, delivering suboptimal social returns.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The strong theoretical case that is made for early childhood investments generates growing attention for quality aspects of childcare investments. Early investments are expected not only to improve the development of innate productivity, but also to have a multiplier effect on later human capital investments (Berlinski, *et. al.*, 2009). Contributions from different research fields have led to a growing consensus that skills are a result of both nature and nurture, genetic predispositions being triggered by the interaction with the environment. And neurobiological research has shown that the plasticity of the brain is greatest during early childhood. These discoveries re-emphasized the importance of having an adequately

stimulating environment in that period. (Stephen, 2012). Argue that innate abilities of a child might be fully developed already before entering compulsory schooling and thereafter would be only amendable at high costs and efforts.

For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, childcare provisions are supposed to lower the risk of falling behind throughout their schooling, and thus breaking the links of inherited inequality (Skibbe, *et al.*, 2011). Policies assuring quality childcare intend to promote homogenizing early childhood investments. And efficiency and equity of education are increasingly considered as mutually reinforcing.

Disadvantages may result, for example, from having only one caring parent in the household, limited economic resources, parents with low educational attainments or belonging to an ethnic minority. Being a boy has also been associated with a higher risk of falling behind. Yet, the literature is not conclusive on what a stimulating environment for such disadvantaged children should look like. Many have argued that policymakers should strengthen the economic conditions of families at the first place. There is significant evidence supporting the importance of sufficient financial resources within the family to invest in the child; i.e. poor families might face a limited access to adequate early childhood provisions due to credit constraints. However, there is also evidence indicating that many families who are financially constrained are likely to underinvest in the child even if more resources were available, which is calling for alternative care provisions.

A selected number of longitudinal studies are usually put forward as strong evidence to stress the potential positive impact of non-parental childcare experiences on child outcomes, in particular for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence, for example, from the Perry Preschool, Syracuse FDRP and Chicago CPC programmes confirms the expectations of positive impacts of childcare investments on employment, income, and reduction of crime and delinquency rates. However, much of that evidence is confined to small-scale, high-quality, intensive programmes that are targeted at disadvantaged children and that are more typical for Anglo-Saxon countries. Little is known so far about whether it holds also for more universal childcare provisions and other country settings. A meta-analysis of international (non-U.S.) studies indicates, however, that positive expectations about childcare investments may also be found in other countries.

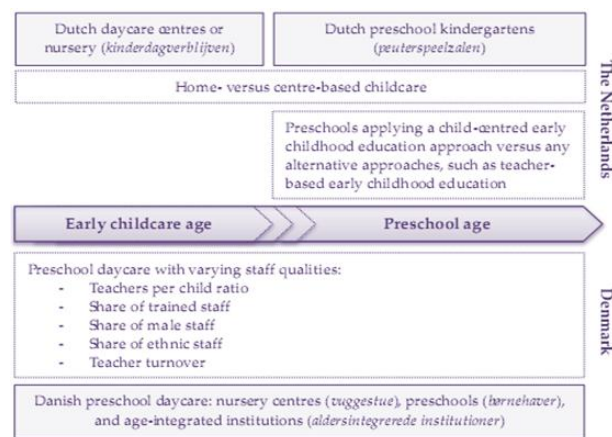


Figure 1: Schematic early childhood care and education options studied

1- Identification strategies: Besides the availability of good data, the study of the effects of childcare quality characteristics largely depends on a good research design to identify true causal effects. The best possible design would allow a random allocation of childcare quality aspects among a sufficiently large group of children, so that all mechanisms of treatment allocation would be controlled by the researcher. However, such experiments are typically not applicable for ethical reasons, e.g. problematic exclusion of some people from a presumably good treatment, or practical reasons, e.g. possible failure to contain external influences. Beyond that, controlled experiments are often subject to some form of selection bias and are very sensitive to drop-outs when they have a longitudinal character. Yet, the evaluation literature builds on some well-known controlled experiments such as, for example, the before-mentioned Perry Preschool, Syracuse FDRP and Chicago CPC programmes. The experimental character of those programmes allows the drawing of conclusions about the impact of childcare investments from the difference in average child outcomes between the treatment and control groups.

2- Study I/III: Centre-based versus home-based childcare: Centre-based childcare is seen as public investments to facilitate maternal employment. Recent theoretical research proposes that such investments potentially lead to substantial gains in child development and thus to high returns for the society as a whole. However, the empirical evidence is still scarce and often contradictory. I study rich survey data of a large-scale cohort study of children living in the India at the beginning of the new millennium. The India has made substantial investments in the last two decades to make the market of centre-based provisions more professional and far-reaching and to improve children's school readiness. I study the impact of experiencing centre- rather than home-based childcare on language, cognitive and non-cognitive development, assessed at the age of 6. To assess whether very long or intensive childcare spells can be harmful, I account for possible non-linearity in the

correlation between the centre-based childcare experience and the child outcomes. As sensitivity analyses, I also apply instrumental variable and structural equation modelling approaches to try to correct for potential biases in my estimates that would result, for example, from unobserved heterogeneity of parents and children. For both ordinary least square estimates as well as the sensitivity analyses the results do not support the significant short-term effects of centre-based childcare stated in the literature.

	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Dutch language test at middle of 2nd grade					
Only home-based care experienced	424	98.58	14.76	36.93	121.47
Some centre-based care attended	4192	102.29	13.58	34.89	123.44
Cognitive test at middle of 2nd grade					
Only home-based care experienced	424	99.94	14.23	52.06	125.26
Some centre-based care attended	4192	102.05	14.07	39.86	127.70
Non-cognitive assessment by teacher during 2nd grade					
Only home-based care experienced	424	100.57	14.31	46.41	135.79
Some centre-based care attended	4192	100.67	14.71	31.77	135.79

Table 1: Summary statistics on child outcomes by childcare arrangement

The sub-sample for which parents provided childcare information shows that about 91% of children experienced centre-based childcare. The survey provides sufficient information to identify which type of centre-based childcare, i.e. preschool kindergarten or daycare centre, the child attended as well as the duration of those childcare experiences. Three quarters of children attended a preschool kindergarten for some time, and nearly every second child attended a daycare centre. Despite the fact that only about one in ten children did not attend any childcare institution before going to school, the spells of centre-based childcare are rather short compared to the possible time children spend at home. The centre-based childcare attendance can be described not only in terms of type of provision but also in terms of the attendance duration. Parents were asked whether their children attended a daycare centre or a preschool kindergarten and, if they did so, for how many years and half-days per week. I calculate the doses of half-days of childcare experiences by multiplying the reported years with the reported half-days per week, 5 assuming that there are 40 weeks per year in which a centre is open. However, information about childcare attendance is not available for all children as not all parents have provided information on at least some of the underlying questions. For those who attended centre-based childcare, the average attendance spell was 206 half-day sessions in daycare centres and 129 half-day sessions in preschool kindergartens; a large share of children has attended both types of childcare.

3- Study II/III: Potential gains from child-centred early childhood education: Early childhood education programmes are presumed to have positive effects, in particular for children who are at risk to fall behind during their schooling. However, there is

disagreement on whether such programmes should be more teacher and curriculum based or instead centred on the individual child. In this chapter, I study child-centred education programmes that are used at preschools in the Dutch province of Limburg, which is in fact mainly a study of 'Speelplezier', a new child-centred programme which has recently been certified as being 'in theory' effective in raising children's school readiness but has not been evaluated yet. I use a rich dataset covering the first three grades at elementary schools in South Limburg for the year 2008/09 to evaluate the impact of child-centred versus alternative early childhood education options. I estimate ordinary least squares effects of attending a preschool, applying child-centred education approaches onto test scores from the beginning of elementary schooling. I control for alternative childcare experiences and various child- and family-related characteristics and re-weight observations of the studied sample to represent population averages. I argue that access to a preschool kindergarten applying child-centred education is to some degree exogenously determined. In a further effort to confirm the causality of effects, I also use propensity score matching and instrumental variable estimation techniques. The different estimate techniques show that child-centred early childhood education has not yet led to significant effects on child development.

4- Early childhood education policies in the

India: In the India, a growing share of women is active in the labour market - 65.5% in 2000 and 73.5% in 2008. Many are in part-time contracts – 59.8% in 2008; more than double the OECD average of 25.3%. Whereas daycare centres or nursery (kinderdagverblijven) are the most extensive provisions of centre-based childcare, preschool kindergartens (peuterspeelzalen) cover a universal group of children with different backgrounds for a few half-day sessions (mornings or afternoons) each week. Predominant centre-based childcare arrangements are daycare centres, which provide care for children from a few months after birth and later include out-of-school arrangements. Daycare provisions are largely organised by (semi) private organisations and have on average a lower quality standard than preschool kindergartens, largely because the latter started earlier in focusing on child development aspects and promoting professionalism. In the India, ECE programmes are applied in preschool kindergartens that provide care for children aged 2-4 years and at the initial stage of elementary schools, which are attended by children aged 4-6 years. Daycare centres are only starting to invest into ECE approaches. Dutch ECE programmes are meant to stimulate linguistic, cognitive and social development. Policies to provide extra stimulation for disadvantaged children were in the 1980s predominantly focused on parent-oriented investments. The growth in female employment was accompanied by increasing demand for non-parental

care. Initially the state did not respond directly to this demand; instead, charity foundations started to fill the gap and founded numerous early childhood care and education arrangements. The first preschools were set up in the 1970s. Since the 1990s centre-based childcare investments combined with parent-oriented programme elements have become a preferred public policy strategy.

CONCLUSION:

The massive extensions of childcare provisions in recent years have raised a number of worries whether children may benefit or be harmed by being raised through part of their early childhood in childcare centres. Given the sensitivity of early childhood in particular for cognitive and language development, parents and policymakers have increasingly questioned the impact of such centre-based childcare provisions. The little data that has been collected through the early childhood and international literature has remained incomplete, so that many policy discussions remain inconclusive, e.g. on how to best allocate public resources to stimulate child development.

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