



Australian Government

Department of Education, Employment  
and Workplace Relations

# Social Inclusion



**SOCIAL INCLUSION AND  
EARLY CHILDHOOD  
DEVELOPMENT**

3

January 2009

This is the third of a series of commissioned papers on social inclusion/exclusion, prepared for the Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations by: Professor Tony Vinson, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney. August, 2008

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# EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

## Importance of good foundations

One of the most decisive findings of behavioural and social research has been the economic and social benefits of early education. The scale of those benefits will be outlined after examining the factors that enhance, or impede, a good beginning to children's education. The common ground is children's readiness to learn in their earliest years and the disadvantageous consequences in educational and other terms of missing that opportunity. Other more refined research will be cited but a recent article in *Business Week* put the situation baldly: "Children form basic cognitive abilities in their earliest years and those who don't get exposed to letters, numbers, and social skills at home quickly lag behind those who do..."<sup>1</sup> (Starr, 2002).

As early education teachers are only too well aware, the situation is more complicated than simple exposure to 'letters, numbers and social skills'. However, precursors of literacy generally provide the foundation upon which teachers base specific instruction to help children to acquire reading and writing skills. Not that becoming acquainted with the nature of books and other basic tools of learning, and engagement in conversation is the whole story. Childhood education and care are inseparable. Children's needs, including intellectual growth and the need for play and friendship, and social, physical and emotional development, are interwoven. It is not only disadvantaged children who benefit from early childhood education and care services but as with reduced class sizes and other compensatory measures, they are especially beneficial for children experiencing developmental difficulties or who are socio-economically disadvantaged (Lynch, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

More is involved in this field than ensuring the adoption of any well-implemented pre-school program, or simply moving forward to an earlier age the beginning of school instruction. Since the 1980s, leading early childhood practitioners have expressed concern about the wisdom of excessively didactic, formal instructional practices for young children (Elkind, 1986).<sup>3</sup> Contemporary research confirms that these early concerns were warranted (Marcon, 2002).<sup>4</sup> Pushing children too soon may actually backfire. The foundation of critical thinking may be found in early childhood experiences that foster curiosity, initiative, independence, and effective choice.

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1 Starr, A., (2002) "The Importance of teaching Tots," *Business Week*, August 26

2 Lynch, R., (2004) *Exceptional Returns: Economic, Fiscal and Social Benefits of Investment in Early Childhood Development*. Washington, Economic Policy Institute

3 Elkind, D., (1986) "Formal education and early childhood education: An essential difference", *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 67, No.9

4 Marcon, R., (2002) "Moving up the Grades: Relationship between Preschool Model and Later School Success," *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring

## Early learning difficulties—Contributors and buffers

Early learning difficulties have many sources but their association with a range of indicators of 'social disadvantage' has been well documented (Human Early Learning Partnerships, 2006).<sup>5</sup> The contributing factors include low birth weight, disabilities, poor nutrition, low housing quality and study amenity, limited access to health care, the presence or absence of educational supports and mental and linguistic stimulation, ethnicity, gender, and living in areas of concentrated social disadvantage (Bradley and Corwyn, 2002).<sup>6</sup>

Behind this broad picture lies research evidence of the salience of many specific factors that contribute to the cumulative impact of social advantage on school readiness. The positive influences include a home environment in which:

- literacy and numeracy skills are manifestly valued and practised, for example, by parents' and children's book reading (Frijters, Barron, and Brunello, 2000);<sup>7</sup>
- parents explicitly contribute to their children's rudimentary learning and provide experiences of sufficient diversity to facilitate them acquiring literacy and numeracy skills, *with early rates of progress sometimes peaking during school holiday periods* (Entwisle et al., 2005; Rashid, Morris and Sevcik, 2005);<sup>8</sup>
- there is an overall responsiveness and support for family members. Roberts et al. (2005)<sup>9</sup> found home environment to be the strongest predictor of children's language and early literacy skills. This 'environment' factor contributed over and above specific literacy practices in predicting children's early language and literacy development. The environment in question is likely in higher SES homes to be accompanied by more expansive parental expectations of what their children can and will attain (Stevenson and Newman, 1986);<sup>10</sup>
- extended conversations take place between adults and children and the latter acquire a sense of personal identity, emotional security and that degree of social competence needed to relate cooperatively with children and unrelated adults (Bost et al., 2006)<sup>11</sup>; and
- health problems and children's disabilities are detected and appropriate assistance sought to promote sound development (Campbell, 1978).<sup>12</sup>

5 Human Early Learning Partnership. (2006) CONTEXT MATTERS: Examining the early literacy skills and developmental health of kindergartens, British Columbia, April  
[http://www.excellence-jeunesenfants.ca/documents/Lesaux\\_posterANG.pdf#search=%22Examining%20the%20early%20literacy%20skills%20and%20developmental%20health%20of%20kindergartens%22](http://www.excellence-jeunesenfants.ca/documents/Lesaux_posterANG.pdf#search=%22Examining%20the%20early%20literacy%20skills%20and%20developmental%20health%20of%20kindergartens%22)

6 Bradley, R., Corwyn, R., (2002) "Socioeconomic status and child development," *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 53:371-99

7 Frijters, J., Barron, R., Brunello, M., (2000) "Direct and mediated influences of home literacy and literacy interest on pre-readers' oral vocabulary and early written language skill," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92, 466-477; see also Senechal, M., LeFevre, J., Hudson, E., Lawson, E., (1996) "Knowledge of storybooks as a predictor of young children's vocabulary," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88, 520-536

8 Entwisle, D., Alexander, K., Olson, L., (2005) "First grade and educational attainment by age 22: A new story," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 110, 1458-1502; Rashid, F., Morris, R., Sevcik, R., (2005) "Relationship Between Home Literacy Environment and Reading Achievement in Children with Reading Disabilities," *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Vol. 38, No. 1, January/February, 2-11

9 Roberts, J., Jurgens, J., Burchinall, M., (2005) "The Role of Home Literacy Practices in Preschool Children's Language and Emergent Literacy Skills," *Jnr. Of Speech, Language and Hearing Research*, Vol. 48, 345-359

10 Stevenson, H., Newman, R., (1986) "Long-term Prediction of Achievement and Attitudes in mathematics and reading," *Child Development*, 57 (3): 646-59

11 Bost, K., Shin, N., McBride, B., Brown, G., Vaughn, B., Coppola, G., Verissimo, M., Monteiro, L., Korth, (2006) "Maternal secure base scripts, children's attachment security, and mother-child narrative styles," *Attachment and Human Development*, Vol. 8, No.3, September

12 Campbell, J., (1978) "The Child in the Sick Role: Contributions of Age, Sex, Parental Status, and Parental Values," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, Vol. 19, March, 35-51

## Economic and Social Benefits

A recent RAND Corporation overview of *Early Childhood Interventions* (Karoly, Kilburn and Cannon, 2005),<sup>13</sup> included a large scale longitudinal study indicating that disadvantaged children not only arrive at school less well prepared but early gaps persist and even widen as children progress through school. The children in question more frequently drop out of high school, and have more unemployment, welfare dependency, delinquency and crime. The RAND review concluded “Even if only a portion of these detrimental outcomes in childhood and adulthood can be averted, the benefits may be substantial” (p. xvi). More specifically, the RAND assessment identified 20 studies of early childhood intervention projects that have employed scientifically rigorous methods of evaluation. Statistically significant benefits were found in at least two-thirds of the programs reviewed. The magnitudes of the favourable effects were sometimes sizable and long lasting particularly with respect to educational progress, labour market outcomes, welfare dependency, and pro-social behaviours. The estimates of returns to society for each dollar invested extended from over one dollar to more than \$17. The available evidence indicates that the economic returns from investing in early intervention programs are larger when higher-risk populations are targeted but even universal programs can yield benefits two and a half times the cost.

Some of the demonstrable benefits of high-quality preschool programs increase in magnitude as longitudinal studies cover longer periods. A good example is the frequently cited High/Scope Perry Preschool study. Three and four year olds were randomly allocated to a group receiving a high quality\* preschool program and a control group. By twenty-seven, only one fifth as many program group members as members of the no-program group had had multiple arrests and only one-third as many were ever arrested for drug dealing (Schweinhart, 2005a).<sup>14</sup> The earnings and general economic status and educational attainments of the program group were significantly higher and their relationships were more stable. The researchers have calculated a seven-fold benefits/cost ratio of the program investment returned to the public—a better investment than the stock market during the same period. A similar picture emerged for subjects who had reached forty-years of age (Schweinhart, 2005b).<sup>15</sup>

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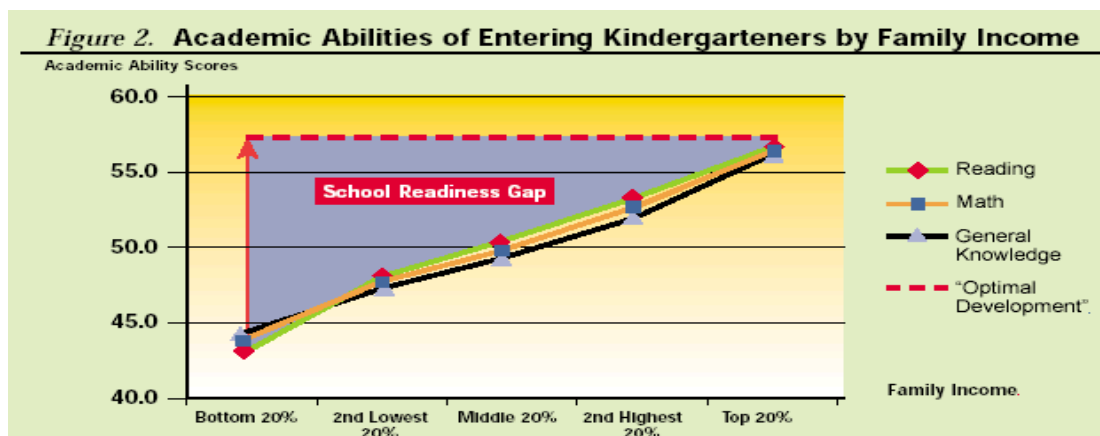
13 Karoly, L., Kilburn, R., Cannon, J., (2005) *Early Childhood Interventions. Proven Results, Future Promise*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, March

\* ‘High quality’ early childhood care and education services employ staff who are educated for their work, have appropriate working conditions, work with groups of children of manageable size and provide activities that match the principles of contemporary curriculum frameworks. That is to say, they require the provision of challenging but non-didactic, creative, enjoyable activities for children and ensure consistent adult and peer groups in stable social and physical environments (Friendly, M., Lero, D., (2002) *Social Inclusion through Early Childhood Education and Care*. Toronto: Laidlaw Foundation).

14 Schweinhart, L., (2005a) “High Quality Preschool Program Found to Improve Adult Status,” High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, <http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/perryfact.htm>

15 Schweinhart, L., (2005b) “Summary, Conclusions, and Frequently Asked questions,” in *Lifetime Effects: The High Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, High/Scope

The Institute for Early Education Research has found that children living in poverty are 18 months behind the average child when they start kindergarten (Barnett, Brown, and Shore, 2004).<sup>16</sup> The same Institute has charted the degree of school readiness of children against their family incomes and the gradient is steep and continuous:



Although subject to the uncertain definitions of ‘preschool,’ a similar gradient is apparent in the Australian Bureau of Statistics preschool participation rates for four-year-old children of varying household incomes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004).<sup>17</sup>

## Adverse Consequences

Failure to achieve rudimentary literacy and numeracy skills casts a long shadow over the remainder of a young person’s education more often than not resulting in the truncation of years of schooling with highly adverse individual and social consequences (Rimm-Kaufman, Kagan and Byers, 1999).<sup>18</sup> Demoralised failing students express their frustration by disrupting others’ learning and substituting attention seeking for real achievement in their own lives. A remarkably strong and stable link exists between what pre-schoolers and early primary students know—or do not know—about words, numbers, sounds, letters and print and later academic performance and social participation (Iafolla, 2003).<sup>19</sup>

Every year hundreds of Australia’s children and young people switch from the main track of academic and social development into sidings offering few life opportunities or ways of successfully preparing for adult life (Teese and Polesel, 2003).<sup>20</sup> The point of departure is commonly learning difficulties, often in combination with emotional, social and relationship problems. Recent research has shown that inadequate education and training is a cornerstone feature of Australia’s most disadvantaged communities (Vinson, 2007).<sup>21</sup>

16 Barnett, S., Brown, K., Shore, R., (2004) “The Universal vs. Targeted Debate: Should the United States Have Preschool for All?” *Preschool Policy Matters*, Issue 6, April

17 Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2004) “Australian Social Trends,” 15th June <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@nsf/0/30edac9d34afc189ca256e9e0028706f?OpenDocument>

18 Rimm-Kaufman, S., Kagan, J., & Byers, H. (1999). The effectiveness of adult volunteer tutoring on reading among “at risk” first grade children. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 38, 143-152.

19 Iafolla, B., (2003) “School to Prison Pipeline.” Boston: *Weekly Dig*, [www.weeklydig.com](http://www.weeklydig.com)

20 Teese, R., Polesel, J., (2003) *Undemocratic Schooling: Equity and Quality in Mass Secondary Education in Australia*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press

21 Vinson, T., *Dropping Off the Edge*, Richmond, Jesuit Social Services/Catholic Social Services Australia

Apart from affording additional protection to still maturing young people, the extended participation in education that is built on the successful early negotiation of schooling, brings significant economic gains. There is a widespread consensus that increasing levels of education and training boosts economic growth. According to an analysis by Day and Dowrick (2004),<sup>22</sup> a one-year increase in the average level of schooling in Australia would lift GDP by 8% and would permanently enhance GDP growth by 0.5% per annum. However, statistical modelling of factors affecting retention at an individual level brings out the impact of successful learning on retention, including both the direct effects on individual plans and the indirect effects of peer impact and family aspirations (Lamb et al., 2004).<sup>23</sup> Early leavers are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of low achievers.

The Business Council of Australia, conscious of the fact that failure to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills in the early years of schooling contributes to many young people leaving school early, has sponsored research into the economic implications of their early departure.<sup>24</sup> Economic modelling has shown that lifting the proportion of young people who achieve year 12 equivalent education from 80% to 90% would:

- increase GDP by \$1.8 billion in 2020 over what it would otherwise be;
- increase consumption in 2020 by \$720 million (18%) higher than would otherwise be the case; and
- attain an internal rate of return of between 8% and 10%.

Moreover, as illustrated earlier in this paper, failure to establish sound educational foundations ultimately results in additional costs for the broader community—through higher welfare costs, higher health costs, higher crime rates and other social impacts. Business faces labour and skills shortages.

## What can be done? Effective policy and practice

One problem is that the children most in need of assistance sometimes participate irregularly in preschool or fail to participate at all. For example, estimates of the combined preschool/long day care attendance figures for NSW converge on a figure of approximately 85% of four-year-olds benefiting from preschools or long day care (Productivity Commission, 2005<sup>25</sup>; Rice and Press, 2003<sup>26</sup>; NSW Legislative Council, 2003<sup>27</sup>). The figure appears to be generally higher throughout most of the country. An effective approach must incorporate methods of outreach and working with families to ensure that their low visibility does not allow disadvantages to compound. In many cases the children concerned develop in environments that the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000)<sup>28</sup> believe are destructive of sound development.

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22 Day, C., Dowrick, S., (2004) "Ageing economics: human capital, productivity and fertility," *Agenda*, Vol.11, No.1, 3-20

23 Lamb, S., Walstab, A., Teese, R., Vickers, M., Rumberger, R., (2004) *Staying on at School: improving student retention in Australia*, Melbourne, Centre for Postcompulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, August,

24 Business Council of Australia, (2003) "The Cost of Dropping Out. The Economic Impact of Early School Leaving," January, <http://www.bca.com.au/Content.aspx?ContentID=87400>

25 Productivity Commission, (2006) *The Report on Government Services, Vol. 2, Community Services*, Canberra

26 Rice, A., Press, F., (2003) *Early Childhood Education and Care in New South Wales*, Background paper prepared for Building blocks for life and learning: A Public Education Council forum on early childhood education, 9th July, 2003

27 NSW Legislative Council, (2003) *Realising Potential. Final Report of the Inquiry into Early Intervention for Children with Learning Difficulties. Report 30, Parliamentary Paper No. 116*, p.16

28 National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences.



A highly influential figure in the field (Shonkoff, 2005)<sup>29</sup> has described toxic stress in children as strong and prolonged activation of the body's stress management systems in the absence of the buffering protection of adult support. "The precipitants include extreme poverty, physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, severe maternal depression, substance abuse, or family violence... (toxic stress) disrupts brain architecture and leads to stress management systems that respond at relatively lower thresholds, thereby increasing the risk of stress-related physical and mental illness." Disadvantaged areas do not have a monopoly on toxic stress but many of the conditions that trigger the condition are characteristic of deprived localities.

Since 1998 English *Sure Start* Local Programs offering a range of early learning, health and family services to parents and children have been opened in highly disadvantaged areas (OECD, 2001)<sup>30</sup>. The 'mainstreaming' of *Sure Start* from 2005 has had the aim of providing access to a core of extended education, health and care services within 2,500 schools including support for parents, family learning opportunities and easy referral to specialist support services. Considerable emphasis is being placed on effective ways of communicating information about services to families that might otherwise miss out—for example, a free phone 'hot line' to a Children's Information Service. *Sure Start* Children's Centres are required to: identify families that may be excluded, and tailor services to their needs; use outreach and home visiting to invite the involvement of families who are unlikely to visit a centre; and develop strong multi-agency partnerships, particularly with health services.

There are concrete examples of development-promoting programs aimed at countering the harmful effects of disadvantage upon children. Within Australia *A Good Start for Children Alliance*, combining the voices of three major non-government agencies has stressed the importance of integrating educational and social provisions (Uniting Care Burnside, SDN Children's Services, and UnitingCare Children's Services, 2005)<sup>31</sup>. Extrapolating from the Alliance's model in terms of what may be practicable for wide adoption within early education schools serving disadvantaged communities, the emphasised program elements include:

- Home-based parent support,
- Centre-based parent support (for example, supported playgroups and parent education),
- Specialised health assessment and required programs (for example, speech therapy, occupational therapy),
- Quality pre-school and care for 18 hours per week, for three and four year olds, and
- Incorporation of parents and carers in shaping the school's programs and learning how they can support their children's advancement. Research shows that virtually all successful early education programs have parent education and parent involvement components (Hull and Edsall, 2001)<sup>32</sup>.

29 Shonkoff, J., (2005) "The science of early childhood development: Closing the gap between what we know and what we do," Address to Harvard Graduate School of Education, 30th October, [http://gsweb.harvard.edu/news\\_events/features/2005/12/21\\_shonkoff.html](http://gsweb.harvard.edu/news_events/features/2005/12/21_shonkoff.html)

30 OECD, (2001) *Starting Strong—Early Childhood Education and Care*, (Executive Summary), France. [http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,2340,en\\_2649\\_34511\\_37416703\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/63/0,2340,en_2649_34511_37416703_1_1_1_1,00.html)

31 Uniting Care Burnside, SDN Children's Services and Uniting Care Children's Services, (2005) *A Good Start for Children—Integrated Child and Family Services in Australia*, Sydney, Uniting Care Burnside (Report prepared by Jennifer Pannell)

32 Hull, R., Edsall, S., (2001) *No Small Matter. Quality Preschools Benefit Children and Society*. Melbourne < Australian Education Union, September

The intervention model being applied by the *Pathways to Prevention* project in a highly disadvantaged neighbourhood in Queensland includes providing social support as one of its key elements (Freiberg, Homel, Lamb, 2007)<sup>33</sup>. The overall goal of the program is described as providing “sensitive parent support in order to enhance family resilience and capacity to deal effectively with adversity, reduce social isolation and promote positive parenting.” This carefully evaluated project appears to be achieving benefits with respect to both family functioning and children’s development (Homel, Freiberg, Lamb, Leech, Batchelor, Carr, Hay, Teague and Elias, 2006)<sup>34</sup>. Initially what is called the *Family Independence Program* was offered as a free service to the families of all four to six year old children enrolled in local preschools. At the same time children attending certain of these preschools participated in a Preschool Intervention Program designed to promote language skills, positive behaviour and pro-social skills. It is apparent from the data gathered that contextual factors like family adversity affect both parents and children. The “support of family capacity” includes individual support programs and advocacy; *group support or training programs* (for example, parenting skills courses, playgroups, life-skills education—from nutrition to budgeting); *family relief*, including holiday and recreation activities, material assistance and childcare (Homel et al., 2006)<sup>35</sup>.

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33 Freiberg, K., Homel, R., Lamb, C., (2007) “The Pervasive Impact of Poverty on Children: Tackling Family Adversity and Promoting Child Development through the Pathways to Prevention Project,” in France, D & Homel, R. (Eds.) *Pathways and Crime Prevention: Theory, Policy and Practice*. Devon, Willan Publishing (in press).

34 Homel, R., Freiberg, K., Lamb, C., Leech, M., Batchelor, S., Carr, A., Hay, I., Teague, R., Elias, G., (2006) ‘No. 323: The Pathways to Prevention Project: doing developmental prevention in a disadvantaged community,’ *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*. Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology, August

35 Ibid.,

# EDUCATIONALLY AND SOCIALLY DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES/ LOCALITIES: OVERVIEW OF INSIGHTFUL PRACTICES AND MEASURES

**Parent education/support**—encouragement of parents' reading and parental encouragement of children's reading (with a system of school borrowings); encouragement to visit community-based educational resources (with travel costs subsidised where necessary); parenting/family life support groups emphasising the importance of conversation—the more language children hear the more they are likely to use; health promoting recreation; guidance in accessing general social help; positive outreach to encourage participation in child's education and general school functioning; in-home support; tailoring assistance to specific needs of families; home visiting.

**Agency partnerships**—for assessment of children's health problems and direct or indirect provision of health assistance; develop multi-agency partnerships in accord with local needs; provide links to marginalised families and children; respite opportunities; facilitating community improvement projects involving local people; leadership development programs and opportunities; advocacy on behalf of individuals and the community; integration of work of local community services, health services and schools and the nurturing of service network through consultations, forums and professional development.

**Centre-based parent support**—(for example, supported playgroups); breaking down social isolation.

**School-based programs**—Quality preschool and care for substantial periods each week for three and four year olds; 'study support' in addition to general classroom learning; emphasis on clear feedback to parents on how their children are progressing; enhanced professional development for staff in area of early education with stress on skill building (for example, in reading, literacy generally and numeracy acquisition, maintenance of high expectations, encouraging reflection on behavioural choices, explicit linkages in learning and good continuity between stages, developing capacity to work with parents and communicating warmth and caring to children); where necessary, regular opportunities for schools to converse with groups of non-English speaking parents in their own language concerning their children's education programs and parents' place in general school functioning; celebration of community identity and unity.

