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European Union News

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New Education Secretary must focus on improving quality of early childhood education

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Guildford: University of Surrey, of United Kingdom has issued the following news release:

Researchers from the University of Surrey, Dr Jo Blanden and Professor Sandra McNally, and University College London, Dr Kirstine Hansen, have completed a comprehensive five-year study on ECEC, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Using administrative data on all children in preschools and the first years of schooling they found that the policy, introduced by the Labour government in 1998, has had little impact on the educational outcomes of children who have participated.

One reason for the lack of effect on educational outcomes is that for every four children given a free place, only one child attended nursery as a consequence of the policy. For the other three, parents were given a discount on ECEC that they would otherwise have paid for without the policy in place. Between 1999 and 2007 the proportion of three year olds in England benefitting from a free nursery place rose from 37 per cent to 88 per cent, but the increase in the proportion of children attending nursery was smaller (from 82 per cent to 96 per cent). The experts also conclude that there is no evidence to suggest that the policy helped disadvantaged children to catch up with their peers in the longer term.

The study also found that characteristics in nursery education commonly thought to provide good outcomes for children only offer small benefits. For example, children who went to a private, voluntary or independent nursery, or preschool (PVI) where there is a teacher with a Qualified Teacher Status have an early education foundation stage profile (FSP) score of a third of a point higher (out of a possible 117), compared to those in PVIs that do not.

The experts also found that children who attended a setting rated 'outstanding' rather than 'good' only scored one point more in the FSP. These two findings imply that more work is needed (by both policy makers and researchers) to discover the features of high quality nursery provision.

Dr Jo Blanden, Reader in Economics at the University of Surrey, said: "Early childhood education and care should be beneficial for children's later development. The fact that the English policy has not demonstrated benefits raises important questions about how the policy can be improved to deliver the high-quality provision that children need."

Kirstine Hansen, Reader in the Department of Social Science at University College London, said: "Our research asks a very difficult but important question of the government and other policy influencers - what is the aim of early childhood education? While it is clear that it helps parents meet childcare costs, it would be even better if it could be designed to also promote children's development. This is particularly important as the number of free hours for three-year-olds doubled in September from 15 to 30."

Josh Hillman, Director of Education at the Nuffield Foundation said: "Although this study did not find a significant link between staff qualification and Ofsted ratings and improved educational outcomes, it did demon-

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strate that there are differences in outcomes between nurseries. The priority for both government and researchers should be to focus on which aspects of children's nursery experience are linked to educational improvement, so that we can ensure the expansion of free nursery provision is as beneficial as possible. The Nuffield Foundation will continue to fund research in this area, both to understand more about what constitutes quality, and to develop and evaluate interventions that can improve children's outcomes at the earliest stage in their education."

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The project 'The Impact of Nursery Attendance on Children's Outcomes' was funded by Nuffield Foundation and is part of a wider collaboration with Emilia Del Bono and Birgitta Rabe, researchers from the University of Essex who were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

The final report from the project can be found here from Thursday 11th January. It is based on the following publications:

Blanden J, Del Bono E, McNally S, Rabe B. (2016) "Universal pre-school education: the case of public funding with private provision". *Economic Journal*, 126 (May), 682-723.

Blanden, J. Del Bono, E., Hansen, K. and Rabe, B. (2017b) "The impact of free early childhood education and care on educational achievement: a discontinuity approach investigating both quantity and quality of provision". University of Surrey School of Economics Discussion Paper No. 06/17.

Blanden, J., Hansen, K. and McNally, S. (2017a) "Quality in Early Years Settings and Children's School Achievement". **Centre for Economic Performance** (CEP) Discussion Paper No.1468, London School of Economics.

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