Setting the record straight on
perry preschool

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The Perry Preschool Study
The study began in Ypsilanti, Michigan in 1962 and included a total of 123 African American children from low income families, who were randomly assigned to treatment or control groups. The programme’s goal was the improvement of the children’s academic achievement. The IQ test scores of the children ranged from 70 - 85, in other words they ranged from below average to delayed levels of intelligence. Children began the programme at three or four years of age and it operated for eight months each year. The children were studied in five ‘waves’ with the first group beginning when they were four, and subsequent groups beginning at 3 years of age.

The intervention involved 2.5 hours of centre-based instruction on weekday mornings, a weekly teacher home visit of 1.5 hours’ duration, as well as monthly parent group meetings. The focus of the home visit was on the child and the parent-child relationship, in particular, supporting the mother to implement the child’s educational curriculum in the home.

Teachers at the centre had child development training, all had Masters’ degrees, and they were paid 10% above the standard pay scale of the time. Teachers received high levels of supervision and ongoing training.

Findings of the Perry Preschool Study
One of the strengths of this research was its strong emphasis on ongoing evaluation of outcomes, and there certainly were many positive outcomes. It should be noted that the longitudinal results are based upon outcomes for 58 children who remained in the intervention group.

References:

1. Campbell et al., 2001
2. Fergusson et al., 2011; Fergusson et al., 2005; Zigler & Styfco, 1994
3. Health Committee, 2013, p.22
4. Zigler & Styfco, 1994
5. Schweinhart et al., 2005, cited by Muennig et al., 2009
6. Campbell et al., 2001
7. Schweinhart et al., 1985
11. Schweinhart et al., 2005, cited by Muennig et al., 2009
12. Zigler & Styfco, 1994
13. Schweinhart et al., 1985
14. Zigler & Styfco, 1994
15. Schweinhart et al., 1985; Zigler & Styfco, 1994
Children receiving the intervention were significantly less likely to have teacher reports of personal or school misconduct.\textsuperscript{16} In adulthood, those who had been in the intervention were more likely to have stable families, higher earnings, have completed more formal education, and have better health.\textsuperscript{17} They were also more likely to own their own home, be employed, and less likely to have been arrested or be reliant on welfare payments.\textsuperscript{18} The benefit in terms of reduced criminal activity was large\textsuperscript{19} and there was a reduced rate of teenage pregnancy.\textsuperscript{20}

Financial analyses indicated that this investment made in early childhood had a major financial return to society.\textsuperscript{21}

**What Does it Mean?**

A specific group of at-risk children, aged 3 – 4 years of age, who received weekly family education and support, and high quality ECE, including small groups and highly trained teachers, for 12.5 hours per week, for eight months of the year, were more likely to have multiple positive outcomes in adulthood.

The above paragraph needs to be understood in its entirety and no single component can be used in isolation whilst claiming to be informed by the research.

**What Does it NOT Mean?**

There are a number of conclusions often attributed to the Perry Preschool research which are in fact not supported by the study. Some of these are noted below.

- The Perry Preschool study does not claim to tell us anything about the effects of ECE on children aged from birth to 3 years of age, as its participants were all 3 or 4 years old. Therefore, this study cannot claim to be based on the evidence provided by this study.
- The children in the study attended for 12.5 hours per week, therefore it tells us nothing about the effects of being in ECE for up to 20 hours per week and cannot be used to support increased hours in ECE.

**Conclusion**

For the reasons cited above, the recommendation to increase ECE for babies and children from birth to 3 years cannot claim to be based on the evidence provided by this study.

The move towards cross party agreement on investment in our youngest children is a hugely positive step for NZ’s future. A commitment to accurately applying the available evidence will ensure this investment is maximised.

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\textsuperscript{16} Schweinhart et al., 1993, cited by Clarke & Campbell, 1998

\textsuperscript{17} Muennig et al., 2009; Weikart, 1998

\textsuperscript{18} Schweinhart et al., 1993, cited by Campbell et al., 2001; Clarke & Campbell, 1998; Weikart, 1998

\textsuperscript{19} Temple & Reynolds, 2007

\textsuperscript{20} Schweinhart et al., 1985

\textsuperscript{21} Weikart, 1998
References


