

Institution: University of Surrey		
Unit of Assessment: 16 Economics and Econometrics		
Title of case study: Improving the evidence-base for more effective policy-making in the UK early years sector		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: From 2013 onwards		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Joanne Blanden	Reader in Economics	September 2005 – present
Sandra McNally	Professor in Economics	April 2012 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Summer 2014 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>The free entitlement to early-years education is a flagship policy costing around £2bn a year (before recent expansions). Prior to research by Blanden, McNally and colleagues there was a strong belief that free nursery provision improves children's learning outcomes. Their research has questioned the effectiveness and value for money of the popular scheme and challenged the received wisdom in the sector around the role of graduate workers in nurseries. The result has been a reconsideration of Government policy goals, changes in the Department for Education's (DfE's) approach to staff development and the adoption of new methods to analyse policy effectiveness in the UK Early Years Sector. By shifting the debate on to a firmer evidence base, the research has indirectly improved outcomes for the families and children who benefit from the policy as well as for the tax-payers who fund it.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>There is a powerful consensus that high quality investment in the early years can improve children's outcomes, close development gaps and improve social mobility. This is supported by randomised trials showing that intensive interventions on poor populations in the US in the 1960s and 70s had strong and persistent effects on children's outcomes. The English Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study from the late 1990s also played a crucial role in making the case for expanding investment in early years in the UK. This research shows that children who attended high quality nursery settings did better in school than those who did not. However, as the decision to send children to nursery might depend on their family resources and ability (not all aspects of which are measurable) it is hard to be confident that the differences observed are causal. In addition, both of these sources of evidence have limited relevance for understanding large scale policy interventions in England from the 2000s. English provision is not as intensive as the exemplar programmes from the US; and both are in contexts without the universal provision brought by the free entitlement.</p> <p>Blanden and McNally's research has been crucial in improving the UK evidence-base on investment in early education. It was the first to directly investigate the impact of the free entitlement on children's learning in England. It makes use of robust quasi-experimental methods and administrative data, a combination which had not hitherto been used in this policy area in the UK. Previous research might lead us to suspect that investment in early interventions would improve outcomes, but this work directly tested this hypothesis and produced surprising results.</p>		

Paper [R1] investigates the impact of the roll-out of part-time free child-care for three-year-olds in England in the early 2000s on early school outcomes using administrative data on almost three million children who started Reception classes between 2002/3 and 2007/8. It asks, what happens to participation and achievement in areas when free childcare is made available? Results highlight that the policy was primarily a financial transfer from Government to parents. Only one in every four of the places provided was really 'new', three quarters of children would have been attending anyway. Consequently, effects on attainment were small overall. In those cases where a child was unlikely to attend without the policy, effects on educational outcomes at age 5 were larger, but did not last through to age 7 and 11. Paper [R3] confirms the limited impact of the free entitlement on child development by comparing children who were eligible for an additional term of free entitlement with those who were not. Blanden and co-authors also examine the hypothesis that high-quality childcare is more beneficial; focusing on the presence of a graduate childcare worker and the inspection rating awarded by Ofsted. Both of these measures have been at the heart of policy to improve childcare quality in the UK but there is a contrast in how they are perceived by stakeholders. The importance of graduates was received wisdom, for example the 2012 Nutbrown review states: "*The introduction of a graduate leader improves the quality of provision in settings.*" Commentary on the role of Ofsted inspections has been more critical, based on anecdote and some evidence that the connection between judgements and quality is quite weak in the early years.

Both [R2] and [R3] found little evidence that having a graduate worker in a setting improves children's outcomes, while [R3] establishes that children in settings rated 'Outstanding' are most likely to benefit from spending an extra term in early education. The results on graduates provide a clear challenge to the established consensus. Those on inspection ratings were also somewhat against the grain as the link between Outstanding ratings and child outcomes was stronger than expected.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[R1] Blanden, J., E. Del Bono, S. McNally and B. Rabe (2016) 'Universal pre-school education: the case of public funding with private provision' *Economic Journal*, May 2016, Vol 126, pp. 682-773. Doi: [10.1111/econj.12374](https://doi.org/10.1111/econj.12374).

[R2] Blanden, J., K. Hansen and S. McNally (2017) 'Quality in Early Years Settings and Children's School Achievement' CEP Discussion Paper No.1468, London School of Economics, 2017. We are not planning to publish this paper separately, the methods and approaches below have been influential in [R3] and for stakeholders.

[R3] Blanden, J., E. Del Bono, K. Hansen and B. Rabe (2017) '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, 2017. An updated version was accepted in December 2020 in the *Journal of Population Economics* under the title "Childcare and children's educational outcomes: a discontinuity approach considering quantity and quality"

Key Research Grant:

Blanden (PI), McNally, Hansen (UCL), *Nuffield Education Programme, Nuffield Foundation (01 January 2013 to 30 June 2015), £125k*

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Clarifying the goals of the free entitlement

Subsidised childcare can have a variety of goals, (i) supporting child development, (ii) encouraging maternal employment and (iii) providing financial assistance to families. The initial stated aims of the policy were the first two (Cabinet Office, 2002), [R1] has helped policy makers to understand that the major impact was most likely the third. In summer 2014, Blanden presented at DfE to an audience of officials working on childcare across Government, she also engaged with Donna

Ward, Chief Analyst at the DfE [S1]. This led to a shift in Government understanding about the goals of the policy. In 2015 Ward wrote *"We have briefed our Minister, Sam Gyimah on your research and it fed into discussions about what objectives we are really pursuing in early years. [...] The Minister understood the conclusion about displacement [of parental funding with Government funding] and has explicitly thought through the benefits of the planned (further) expansion of early years entitlement in helping families with the cost of child care and to make working a more affordable option for both parents. This is the key focus of the 30-hour offer, as explained by DWP Ministers, too."* The findings of the primary transfer effect and small child development impact were included in written and oral evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Affordable Childcare in 2014 [S2]. The Minister was directly questioned on them (Q175) and they were cited numerous times in the final report.

The research in [R1] was debated in the media through Blanden's appearance on Woman's Hour in October 2014, articles in the Telegraph (one authored by Blanden), the Daily Mail, BBC online, Nursery World and the Australian (which led to interaction with Australian Think Tank the Grafton Institute [S3]).

Understanding what high-quality means (and what it doesn't)

The results in [R2] and [R3] indicating that putting graduate workers in nurseries is not a panacea have made an important contribution to the debate. The thinking and approach of both policy makers and third sector organisations (Save the Children, the Educational Policy Institute [EPI], The Family and Childcare Trust [now Coram Childcare]) has shifted as a result of the findings and due to Blanden's engagement. Ellen Broome of NatCen (and previously of the Family and Childcare Trust) writes *"Dr Blanden has altered received wisdom with her work. Prior to her research on the free entitlement policy makers had to rely on outdated, and often limited, evidence to inform decisions about policy and practice change in the early years [...] [the research] challenged the perception that increasing the share of graduate workers in childcare would be enough to improve children's outcomes."* [S4].

This shift in sector understanding has led to a change in DfE's emphasis and activities. Charlotte Clark of DfE writes *"Jo's recent study [...] is prompting policy makers to explore complementary approaches to strengthening the skills and capacity of the early years workforce (e.g. in-service training) to drive quality improvement - and in turn - better outcomes for children. [...] government is also investing £20m in workforce training for early years practitioners in pre-reception settings in targeted disadvantaged areas."* [S5] Megan Jarvie from the Family and Childcare Trust (now Coram) notes that the research influenced Labour party policy prior to the 2019 election *"Initially they were planning on solely aiming towards a graduate in every setting, but developed these proposals to look at a range of requirements on the workforce, in part due to Dr Blanden's findings."* [S6] The shift away from a focus on graduates is beneficial as nurseries struggle to attract them, partly because they must be paid more. Potentially this shift of focus saves the taxpayer money.

Ofsted have acted on the basis of the finding that attendance at Ofsted Outstanding nurseries is particularly beneficial. James Bowsher-Murray writes: *"This striking result on the importance of being 'Outstanding' has led us at Ofsted to think carefully about what the particular features of Outstanding nurseries might be, and to focus much more of our published statistical analysis on Outstanding settings rather than the combination of Good and Outstanding as we did previously"*. [S7] If Outstanding nurseries are what matters as shown in [R3] then if Ofsted concentrates on tracking and promoting them this will improve outcomes for children.

Influencing analysis and policy research on Early Years

As well as influencing policy debate, the use of quasi-experimental methods and linked data have changed both the expectations and practice of Early Years' policy research. Tim Leunig, Expert Advisor at the Department of Education states *"Blanden and colleagues' work has shifted expectations around how policy-relevant research can be conducted in Early Years and the value-added that administrative data can provide in this area."* [S8]

The data and methods used has shaped the analysis conducted by Ofsted [S7], the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) [S9] and the EPI [S10], and Blanden has provided advice on how these organisations can make use of the approaches used by the team. *Ofsted states “we were extremely interested in the potential of the matching methodology used by Blanden and colleagues to expand our analytical capacity. Over the past year we have been developing proposals to use Blanden’s approach. [...] The aim of this work is to better understand the drivers for children’s attainment and inform future inspection frameworks.”* [S7] The overall goal is once again to improve provision for children, although progress on this front has been delayed as inspections were paused in March 2020.

The project has influenced both the Nuffield Foundation and EPI’s research strategy. [R1] is heavily cited in the Nuffield report ‘Early years education and childcare. Lessons from evidence and future priorities’. This report sowed seeds for a new research programme on Early Years Education and Childcare, and more recently a wider initiative on ‘the changing face of early childhood in Britain’ [S11]. Nuffield is supporting the collaboration between Blanden and EPI on the project “An Analysis of the Early Years Workforce and its Impact on Children’s Outcomes” (Nuffield Foundation, 48 months from 2018-2020, £213,475). One of the explicit aims of this project is to update and extend the analysis in [R2]. This project forms a key plank of EPI’s work on the Early Years which was influenced at its inception by discussions with Blanden [S10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[S1] Ward, D. (2015) Email to Jo Blanden regarding influence of the research on Government, written when Donna Ward was Chief Analyst at the Department for Education. (PDF)

[S2] House of Lords (2015) Select Committee on Affordable Childcare Report and Transcripts. (PDF)

[S3] Extensive media coverage, e.g. Telegraph, BBC online, Nursery World, The Australian, BBC Radio Four Women’s Hour. (PDF)

[S4] Ellen Broome, (2020) Statement Letter for 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact evaluation in the United Kingdom. At the time of writing Ellen was working as the Director of Children and Families at NatCen and had previously served as Chief Executive of the Family and Childcare Trust (PDF)

[S5] Clarke, C. (2019) Statement Letter for 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact evaluation in the United Kingdom. Charlotte writes as Head of Quality and Outcomes – Early Years at the Department for Education. (PDF)

[S6] Harding, C. and Jarvie, M. (2017, 2019) Statement Letter for 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact evaluation in the United Kingdom. At the time of writing Claire was Head of Research at the Family and Childcare Trust. Megan is Head of Coram Family and Childcare (formerly the Family and Childcare Trust). (PDF)

[S7] Bowsher-Murray, J (2019) Statement Letter for 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact evaluation in the United Kingdom. James is Head of Early Years and Social Care, Data and Insight, Ofsted. (PDF)

[S8] Leunig, T. (2019) Email to Jo Blanden regarding the influence of the research at the Department for Education. Tim is an expert advisor in the Department. (PDF)

[S9] McBride, T. (2017) Letter to Jo Blanden regarding the influence of her research on the Early Intervention Foundation. Tom is the Evidence Director at the EIF. (PDF)

[S10] Laws, D. (2019) Statement Letter for 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact evaluation in the United Kingdom. David Laws is the Executive Director of the Education Policy Institute. (PDF)

[S11] Hillman, J (2019) Impact of project supported by the Nuffield Foundation. Josh Hillman is Director of the Nuffield Foundation's Education Programme. (PDF)