Does preschool make a difference?

Yes! While such a simple answer may satisfy many of the parents of an estimated 400,000 children attending one of the approximately 14,000 preschools, it does little to satisfy those seeking meaningful educational understanding. Even adding the prefix “high quality” to preschool only marginally elucidates the question. We need to know what is the difference that high quality preschool can make. Parents have a right to know if spending as much as Rs:4000 per month plus a hefty admission fee for three of four hours a day is giving value. Even those at the lower socioeconomic scale paying Rs: 1000 a month or less, are interested in the goals of the preschool.

Unfortunately the true purpose of Early Childhood Education has been corrupted, partly by those schools seeking easy profits or at best a worthwhile return on their investment. With the educational climate in Sri Lanka becoming more aggressively competitive, many schools are playing on the parent’s anxieties to get their children admitted to “good” schools, government or private. Therefore, formal learning has now reached the kindergarten, and workbooks filled with alphabet letters, numerals as well as time-consuming worksheets (colour the circles blue and the squares red) have become the way the curriculum is measured. Such preschools do make a difference in that they suppress initiative and creativity and replace them with passivity.

For many years the buzz words in preschool advertising have been “English Medium” though what this implies is vague. Does it mean that only English is spoken or at least spoken for much of the time? This would render most children speechless and unable to use their greatest achievement, that of mother tongue language of their 3 or 4 years on our planet. Communication in its many forms is a key element in a child’s life and to marginalize it by insisting on English is poor educational practice. Of course there is a time and place for English in poems (not nursery rhymes), songs and games but taught in a natural way. However, many
parents see the acquisition of English as a main curriculum goal.

There has been much research as to the short and long term value of preschool education. Anecdotal evidence that high quality preschool has real advantages is insufficient, especially as governments in the UK, USA and other countries are investing heavily on the social and economic benefits of Early Childhood Education. The Perry Preschool experiment in the USA is the best controlled longitudinal study in support of quality early childhood education. 123 low income 3 year-old children were either assigned to a high quality preschool or to a control group which received no preschool experience. These subjects were tracked for more than three decades. At age 40 the differences were stark in terms of education, employment and social factors with the preschool group showing significant positive gains.

For a long time psychologists have argued that the initial five years (and even the nine months gestation period) of childhood, play a significant and important part in the development of both cognitive and non-cognitive abilities. Knowledge, attitude and skills are far more diverse than the narrow range of activities so predominant in many preschools. While it is easy to measure the result of some aspects of prescriptive teaching, most of what a child gains in a quality early education setting is more observable than measurable. “What did you do at school today?” is likely to be answered with the single word “play”. Sand boxes, water troughs, blocks, vehicles, dolls, puzzles plus a playground that invites challenging play, often are undervalued by parents. The child that spends a lot of time with another in constructing an urban scene using blocks, vehicles and other available materials is simply playing rather than working according to many parents and even some teachers. Experienced educators know that “play is the work of the child”.

The Effective Preschool and Primary Education study, EPPSE, investigated the effect of preschool experience, intellectual and social development of more than 3000 preschool children in England. This is the largest study in Europe on the effects of preschool education on children's intellectual and social development. Detailed assessments were made at 3, 5, 6, 7, 10 and 11 years of age. The 141 preschool settings were also studied and included private, voluntary and state. For comparison purposes a group of children with no preschool experience were also studied. The longitudinal design of the study provides sound evidence on the impact on children's development of different types and amount of preschool provision. Many left preschool at age 5 with confidence and all the skills needed to succeed in primary school. Those with poor skills in communication, little capacity to concentrate, and low self esteem often set the course for failure.

Key findings include:
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- Children who attended preschool made more cognitive and behavioural progress compared with those who stayed at home.
- The stimulation provided in the child’s early home learning environment was even more important than income and social status of the family.
- Quality and duration of preschool are important and are linked to better cognitive development and improved independence, concentration and sociability.
- Guided learning, but not direct teaching was as important as free play, although both are necessary for optimal development.

Further research evidence comes from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). This research which commenced in 1986 and concluded its final report in 2006 is unique because 15 diverse countries participated and used common ways to measure family background, teacher’s characteristics, structured features of settings, children’s experiences and children’s developmental status. The study, the largest of its kind to date, involved more than 5000 4-year-olds and some 1800 settings. The valuable information on early childhood services and their effect on the lives of children and families carries important implications for early childhood program development. The purpose of the IEA Preprimary Project was to identify how characteristics of early childhood settings are related to children's language and cognitive development at age 7.

Reading the report in full uncovers many aspects of early childhood education that lead to more beneficial and positive outcomes. Four main factors can be identified that do make a difference. Children’s language abilities are enhanced when early childhood teachers allow them to choose many of their activities on their own. This includes communication between children and non-formal communication with teachers. Children fare significantly better in language skills development with teachers who have achieved a higher level of education. The less time
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children spend in whole group activities, the better they develop their thinking and problem solving skills. The more equipment and materials available in preschool settings, the better the outcome in terms of children’s cognitive performance. Larry Schweinhart, president of Highscope and a researcher on the study summed up “we were pleased to find this new evidence from around the world that early childhood educators contribute to children’s development when they emphasize child-initiated activities, limit use of whole group instruction, and provide abundant materials in the classroom”.

How do these findings reflect on the views of parents that preschool is preparation for grade 1 and this is best served by teaching activities best kept (or not kept) for grade 1 such as formal reading, writing and number. Parents want to see tangible evidence of learning and exercise books filled with repetitive and often meaningless copying seems to satisfy this desire. The less tangible outcomes that includes self-confidence, cooperation, creativity, problem solving, initiative, reading readiness, self-control, concentration, adaptability, thinking skills, inquisitiveness, questioning, perseverance, sociability and sheer enjoyment in participation, are difficult to substantiate. Parents and teachers need to recognize and understand these developing qualities are served by a preschool that shows best practice in early childhood development and not by one that adds another layer to the already overcrowded educational pressure pot.

Conclusion:
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Preschool quality is directly linked to quality teacher education, suitable materials and equipment and the curriculum methodology and philosophy in which these are used. There is no simple input-output model and there are numerous variables which influence the child’s educational, emotional, social and physical development. But what is certain is that during the initial crucial five years, high quality parenting and early learning experiences can make a substantial difference to success in ensuing years. The opposite might also be true whereby poor parenting and lack of preschool experience, may lead to an unsatisfactory lifestyle, dependency and anti-social behaviour. There are no absolute guarantees and for many inexplicable reasons, later years in the child’s life can take a turn for better or worse. However, this must not inhibit us from providing the best possible upbringing for every child in the knowledge that it is the best for the individual, society and the world at large. Childhood must not be exploited by pressuring 4 and 5 year-olds into formal education, but should be given the respect and encouragement that will nurture an individual to become an educated, stable, productive and happy citizen.

Footnote:
The term Montessori is often used in Sri Lanka for any preschool though in reality it denotes a school that should closely follow the methodology of the pioneering work of Dr. Maria Montessori started in the early years of the past century. Though many of her ideas have been incorporated into mainstream early childhood education, no country has modeled its preschool or primary education solely on Montessori practice which has both its supporters and critics. Sri Lanka lacks well behind in the development and research in Early Childhood Education. The fact that there is no university department (apart from OUSL) or model schools in this important area of education, seems to imply that it has not been recognized as a high priority need. No specific journals or periodicals are available and only minimal government involvement and regulation influence how preschools operate. All too often preschool practice is subjected to market forces that have little to do with the theory and practice of good education. Anyone, anywhere and anyhow can start a preschool. No qualifications are required and the qualifications that some teachers possess are often poorly constituted. It seems highly doubtful if there is sufficient concern or interest to bring some much needed changes. The scholarship examination at grade 5 has become the benchmark of achievement. The fact that over 90% “fail” has only brought about more pressure to succeed through extra classes both at school and at tuition centres. Quantity is replacing quality, and already some kindergarten children are subjected to pressures that are educationally damaging in the ill-gotten belief that these best
serve the child’s future success.

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