

## NEW STUDY SHOWS UK PRE-SCHOOL POLICY THREATENS CHILDREN'S FUTURES

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As the UK rushes to expand nursery places for pre-school children, politicians and the advisers imply that more nursery education is a cure for all ills – from social disadvantage to failing academic standards. But are they correct? Is the UK on the right track? What evidence is there that government policy will help children or society at large?

*Comparing Pre-School Standards* examines policy for pre-school education in a number of continental and anglophone countries and analyses the structures, funding, and participation rates. It draws on the most recent data to provide a comparative picture of the countries on which the study focuses: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the US, Japan and New Zealand. What does the evidence tell us about the benefits or disadvantages of different models? Where does the UK differ from these countries and what lessons can be learned? Politeia's Education Commissioners, Sig Prais, Chris Woodhead and Caroline St John Brooks discuss the issues and the study concludes with clear recommendations for policy in this country.

In particular the study shows that:

- The UK has a lower compulsory school starting age than the other countries in the study (except the Netherlands) and therefore pre-school ages are younger. Most countries have a school starting age of 6 and therefore pre-school begins at 5 with some participation at 4. This country, by contrast has all four-year-olds and a majority of three-year-olds in pre-school education.
- No other country in our study herds small children as young as three into primary schools for pre-school provision. Most offer separate nursery schools or kindergarten or mixed programmes, some being home based. The UK is unique in sending tiny children, often as young as three, to primary schools.
- No consensus exists on the best pre-school curriculum. Some countries (like Switzerland and Japan) stress social and cultural integration as an aim, others (like France) aim to prepare children broadly for school. Britain should, as the commissioners point out, be very careful before imposing a single model on all children, which may hold back some or damage others.
- No other country in our study formally entrenches state monopoly provision to the extent that the UK does, offering parents so little choice. Germany gives private providers the right in law to take precedence over the state. Holland does not have state schools. France funds non-state provision. Mixed funding and provision takes place in the US, Japan and New Zealand. Only in Switzerland is there one form of pre-schooling, but there it is for far older children – five year olds and some four (as compulsory starting age is 6-7 depending on canton).

The UK needs to rethink pre-school education policy. Primary schools are no place for children as young as 3 and may be unsuitable for four year olds. No other country herds children of that age into state owned primary schools. Parents need to be given far greater choice over where to send their children, and the UK should abandon its hand to mouth attempts to impose an ill-thought out curriculum on pre-school children. Far more research needs to be done about what is sensible. The evidence to date is that the present system, now being expanded, which is based especially on sending pre-school children to primary schools, will not work. It may well damage young children and undermine both their security and academic success in the long run.

***Comparing Pre-School Standards. The Report of the Politeia Education Commission (Sig Prais, Caroline St. John Brooks, Chris Woodhead) ed. Sheila Lawlor*** is available from Politeia, 22, Charing Cross Road, WC2H 0QP at £10.