

Edited by **Hans-Peter Blossfeld, Nevena Kulic,  
Jan Skopek and Moris Triventi**

# **Childcare, Early Education and Social Inequality**

An International Perspective

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*eduLIFE Lifelong Learning series*



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# Childcare, Early Education and Social Inequality

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**Series Editors:** Hans-Peter Blossfeld, *European University Institute, Italy* and Sandra Buchholz, *Otto Friedrich University Bamberg, Germany*

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### Childcare, Early Education and Social Inequality

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## Foreword

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This exciting book breaks new ground in three ways: it shows how inequalities in life chances begin in the family and kindergarten long before the start of school; it considers the specific characteristics of early childhood education that matter most for children's development; and it presents cutting-edge methods for investigating these matters within and across countries. In a nutshell, this book extends into the preschool phase of development many of the well-established sociological concepts and methods for studying educational inequality. Led by Hans-Peter Blossfeld's team at the European University Institute, this volume summarizes the work of the largest cross-national study on the early roots of inequality. Although it tells us more about the origins of inequality than effective ways to combat it, there are some promising reports on policies and practices that have been shown to ameliorate it. Particularly valuable are the integrative chapters that begin and end the book. These were written by key members of the European University Institute project and they guide the reader to common findings and themes across the chapters. Importantly for comparative research, longitudinal differences over time within a country and differences across countries move the field forward as researchers attempt to separate country-specific effects from cross-national, generalizable ones.

This is the first large-scale and integrated sociological analysis of the roots of educational inequality well before children start school. It is a clear wake-up call to the many disciplines concerned with making life fairer for those born in disadvantaged circumstances. Of course, 'education' here refers to learning not only in the home through intimate interactions with family members but also in the crèche and kindergarten. For this reason, the book will broaden our understanding of the systematic ways that societies shape the life-course trajectories of individuals from different social and cultural backgrounds and point the way to possible interventions.

The editors of this volume provide a detailed introduction (Chapter 1) and a cross-cutting conclusion (Chapter 15) that integrate the studies through common themes. This foreword is written by an 'outsider' acting as a tourist guide who points the reader in the direction of 'sites of outstanding merit' across this rich theoretical landscape.

## INEQUALITY BEGINS AT HOME

One of the most innovative chapters in the book is a study by Weinert and colleagues who used the German National Education Panel Study (NEPS) to film interactions between very young six- to eight-month-old children and their mothers. Although much was similar across dyads from different social groups, interesting findings emerged from a 'bioecological model' showing social divergence in developmental pathways. At this very early age, no social differences were found in standardized tests such as the Bayley Developmental Scales. However, there were intriguing social differences in children's information processing, including sustained attention to objects and the activity level in exploration. The quality of maternal interaction predicted such differences, and this was related to social background. Thus, early but small disparities in interaction patterns seem to launch the children in this large German sample onto different life courses well before their first birthday.

## UNEQUAL ACCESS TO CHILDCARE

What early childhood education shares with higher education is its non-statutory nature, making access neither straightforward nor cost-free. In many countries, it is maternal education and, to a lesser degree, social class or material resources that relate most strongly to age of entry into childcare. For example, the chapter on Italy (Brilli, Kulic, and Triventi) shows how it is the children of better educated mothers who enter childcare at an earlier age and thus gain a privileged start to their educational careers, and this is particularly the case in the industrial north.

The chapter on Russia is equally informative, with children of more advantaged families participating more often in childcare. However, the longitudinal data show a decline in differential access in recent years, although the more advantaged still have higher rates of intensive use. One of the new insights of this volume is to distinguish starting age from intensity of use. Both may be important, but common starting ages may disguise important differentials in the intensity of use.

## MECHANISMS OF POSITIVE EFFECTS – SINGLE COUNTRY STUDIES

One of the major strengths in the book is its clearer articulation of the *specific* mechanisms by which early childhood education plays a major role in inequalities. Participation in early education and care varies in terms of

timing, intensity, and quality. Each of these contributes to children's outcomes, but sometimes in different ways in different countries. Strong chapters on this theme come from the Netherlands (Leseman, Mulder, Verhagen, Broekhuizen, van Schaik, and Slot), Norway (Zachrisson, Dearing, Blömeke, and Moser), the United Kingdom (Del Boca, Piazzalunga, and Pronzato), Germany (Skopek), Denmark (Wahler, Buchholz, and Breinholt), and Finland (Karhula, Erola, and Kilpi-Jakonen). Taken together, they make a convincing case for how differential access to specific patterns of early childcare relates systematically to developmental gains in not only academic and linguistic skills but also (especially in the case of the Netherlands) the 'soft skills' related to executive functioning. The Nordic countries, with their well-funded and public childcare system, excel in making childcare available to all; but even here, subtle differences emerge with respect to timing the start of childcare and its consequent advantages. Even in the well-funded and universal Swedish childcare system, more advantaged parents time the start of preschool to their own advantage – a luxury that poorer families cannot afford.

## CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON

A compelling chapter written by Dämmrich and Esping-Andersen presents a macro analysis based on two large international studies of reading at age 11 (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, PIRLS) and age 15 (Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA). It investigates the contribution of specific characteristics of individual preschool systems to the single, most important competence for achievement in secondary school and future employment: *reading*. We have known for more than a decade that the beneficial effects of preschool systems vary across countries, and this intriguing cross-national study considers the effects of a finite set of preschool characteristics on later outcomes. Although the sample of children in this analysis attended preschool a decade before most other samples in this book, the pattern is generally similar to that found in studies of more recent samples. Higher quality and greater intensity of preschool attendance improves reading competence after controlling for selection factors. This cross-national chapter also establishes the 'long reach' of effects that extends well into secondary education.

## POSITIVE ACTION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TO COMBAT INEQUALITIES

This book makes abundantly clear that early education is now conceived by both parents and scholars as the first phase in an educational career. Although the majority of chapters show how early education *reproduces* inequalities, two very strong chapters describe the opposite: how early education policies and practices can *intervene to lessen* social disparities. Leseman and colleagues describe the success of a targeted policy in the Netherlands for disadvantaged children, including those from migration backgrounds, who attended high-quality centres with a stronger emphasis on pre-academic activity. Complex modelling over time in this cohort study showed that more disadvantaged children 'catch up' not only in vocabulary (found in many other studies) but also in executive skills such as selective attention. This typifies a welcome trend in this book to broaden outcomes to include information processing, executive function, and interactional activity. Success in life requires much more than formal academics, and many chapters in this volume report on innovative measures of 'skills for the twenty-first century'.

In another intervention study, Barnett and Frede report on the outcomes of a large-scale public programme in New Jersey that raised the quality of early education through professional upgrading of staff, salary incentives, implementation of a challenging curriculum, and an innovative 'continuous improvement system'. Using a regression discontinuity design, the researchers demonstrated increased quality of provision and a lessening of achievement gaps of up to 30 per cent following the large-scale intervention. This chapter is exemplary in that it describes the political will and leadership necessary for a whole system change that can alter traditional developmental trajectories. Barnett argues that 'rigorous standards and policies alone (will) not produce the results we observed'. In other words, reforms 'on paper only' will not succeed.

## MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH METHODS

Although this book makes an outstanding contribution to theory concerning the social roots of educational inequality, it will also serve as a text for the design and analysis of research using longitudinal datasets. Most of the individual studies are correlational and observational in nature with just a smattering of intervention. The issue of measurement is always close to the surface, whether it be measuring process quality (as in the case of the Netherlands), children's developmental outcomes (as in the case of

new baby and interaction measures devised for the German NEPS panel study), or the creative use of national register data to 'infer' childcare use (as in the Swedish study). In addition to careful and new forms of measurement, the book contains good examples of simulations to model the (predicted) effects of change to social policy. This rich seam of enquiry has many practical implications for governmental decision making. Through its methods alone, this book advances work in sociology, social policy, and education. For this reason, it will be useful on post-graduate courses in these fields.

The editors and individual authors of this innovative book have created a coherent set of studies that 'speak to each other' and whose sum is far greater than its individual parts. Theoretical and methodological integration takes place largely in the thoughtful introduction (Kulic, Skopek, Triventi, and Blossfeld) and the powerful conclusion (Skopek, Kulic, Triventi, and Blossfeld). It has been an honour to write this foreword and an intellectual treat to read the individual chapters. Early childhood education used to be the 'Cinderella' in scholarly circles; it has finally been charted on the map of phases in education that contribute to, and fight against, educational inequality across the life course.

Professor Kathy Sylva  
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# Preface

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This volume represents the fourth and final cornerstone of a four-volume series of comparative research analysing education as a lifelong process – the *eduLIFE* Lifelong Learning series. We call it the cornerstone because it extends the scope of three previously published volumes on adult learning, school-to-work transitions, and differentiation in secondary education to also encompass the conditions and causes of educational inequality in the initial phase of the life course: early childhood.

The book tackles mechanisms that differentiate children's experience in their early years of life with consequences for subsequent educational careers and life chances. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, we trace the origins of later educational inequality by studying how far skill acquisition and learning outcomes already start to diverge between children from various social backgrounds in the very first few years of life. We also look at the potential of institutions of early education and care to reduce social inequality in educational opportunities and attainment.

Although this book is clearly centred on how inequalities are created through different forms of childcare and early education, we also acknowledge the essential role of early education and care for the whole of society. Institutions of childcare and education may promote the well-being of children and their rights as well as their emotional and intellectual development. Moreover, their value goes beyond the provision of well-being and equal opportunities for children; they also represent a basis for equal opportunities for men and women, a way of increasing female employment, and a support for the well-being of parents. Cross-national assessments taking into account variations in preschool and childcare settings in contemporary societies are very rare, and our book makes an important contribution to filling this gap.

The 12 country chapters in our volume cover a variety of national contexts and provide insight into a broad range of different early education and care policies. We show how the costs, availability, and quality of early childhood education vary across countries. Moreover, we discuss how far and in what ways institutional contexts may affect the distribution of opportunities among young children from different social backgrounds. The volume provides evidence that initial disadvantage may, to some

extent, be offset by adequate policies, and it highlights the successful examples of good quality early education. However, the volume also suggests that one should not be too over-optimistic about the outcomes of such policies, because some kinds of inequalities are deeply rooted in families' resources and behaviours. Hence, they can hardly be eliminated in full, even though they can be reduced.

We thank all the contributors who supported us in this endeavour. It has been a wonderful experience to collaborate with leading experts on the topic coming from various disciplines. We have gained knowledge about the ways in which many facets of childcare relate to social inequality, but we have also learned that interdisciplinarity is a useful and often underused tool for gaining a better understanding of the phenomena that surround us. We are grateful to the *eduLIFE* internal team that formed the basis for this project, and whose dedication in all its stages was indispensable for the preparation of the volume. We thank Fabrizio Bernardi and Ingrid Schoon for their insightful comments that have greatly improved the final version of this volume. As with the previous three editions, major thanks also go to our proofreader and language editor Jonathan Harrow who thoroughly edited each and every contribution to this volume. We were also fortunate enough to have great student collaborators such as Anna Kyriazi and Diana Roxana Galos who helped us at different stages of the volume preparation and the publishing process itself. We extend our appreciation to Edward Elgar Publishing for their valuable assistance in the *eduLIFE* book series. Finally, we would like to thank the European Research Council (ERC) for its financial support.

Hans-Peter Blossfeld  
Nevena Kulic  
Jan Skopek  
Moris Triventi

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