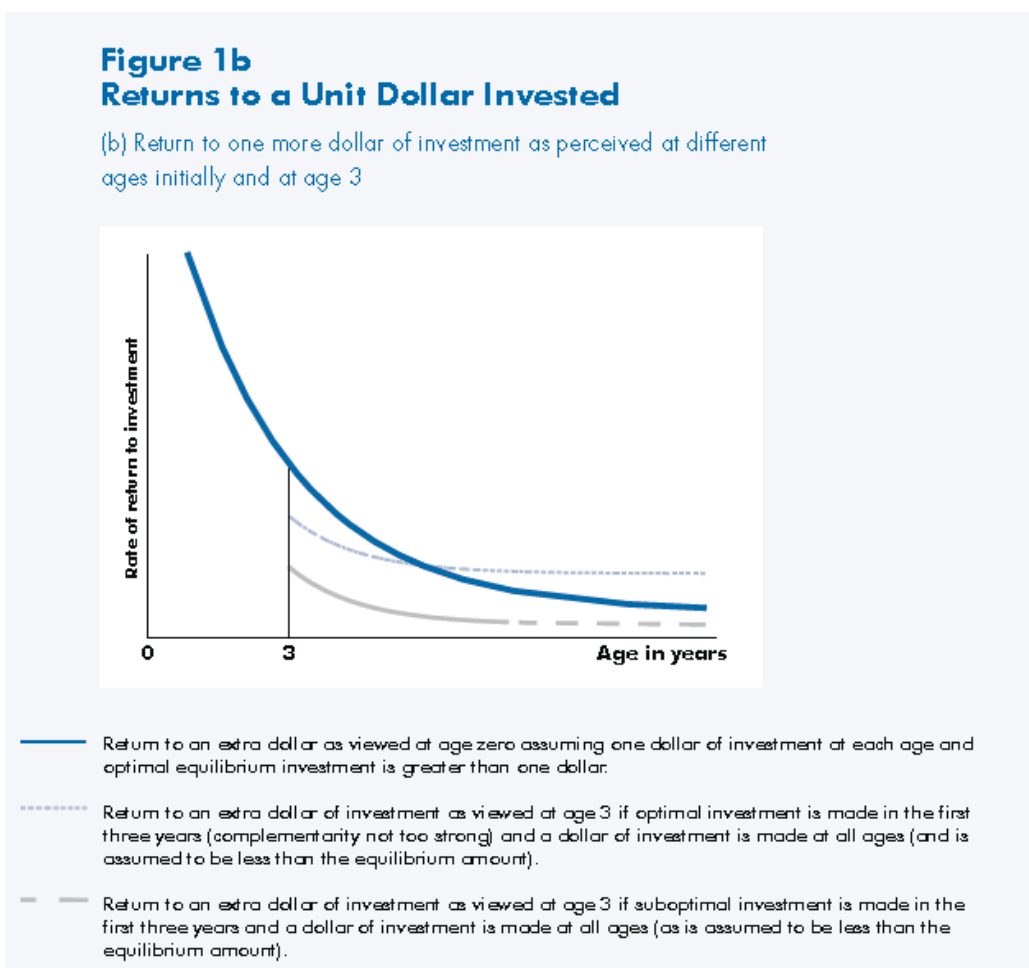


# Can schools make a difference and cut a vicious circle of poverty – underachievement – poverty?

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Nobel prize winning economist James Heckman has analysed data from many different studies and produced a graph showing the relationship between investment and the return to investment for interventions at different stages of the life cycle.



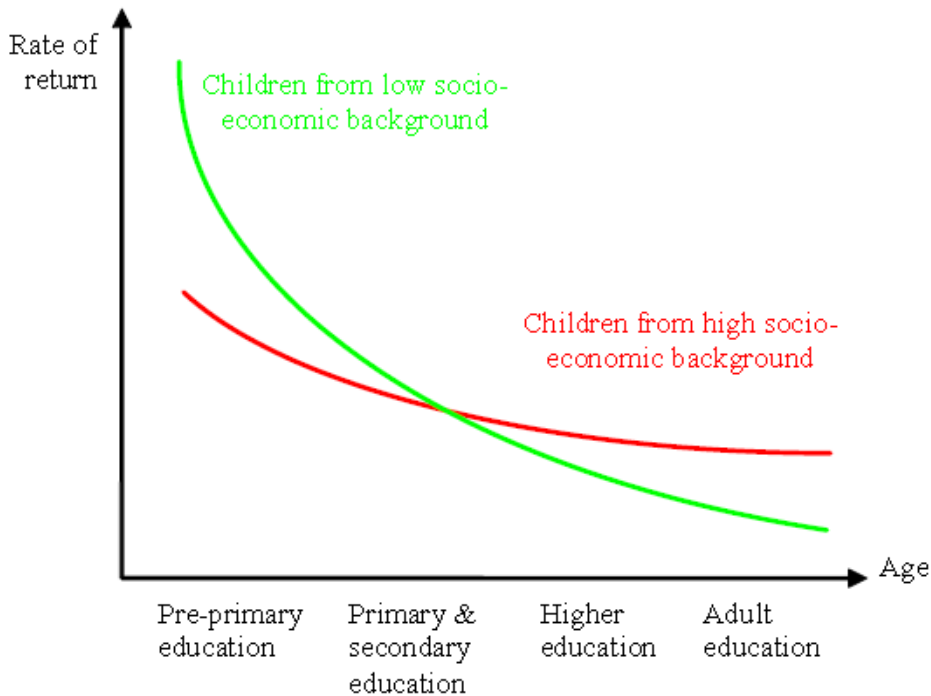
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(Source: James J. Heckman, *The Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children (First focus, 2008)*)

Education is clearly such an intervention. Cunha et al.(2005) showed that the curve of the rate of returns to investments is steeper for the disadvantaged children and young people. That means that at the early age, the investment to education of the most disadvantaged is not only an issue of equity but also that of effectiveness.

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*Figure 1: Returns to investment at different levels of lifelong learning*



Source: Cunha, Flavio, James J. Heckman, Lance Lochner, Dimitriy V. Masterov (2006). *Interpreting the Evidence on Life Cycle Skill Formation*. NBER Working Paper 11331, Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2005)

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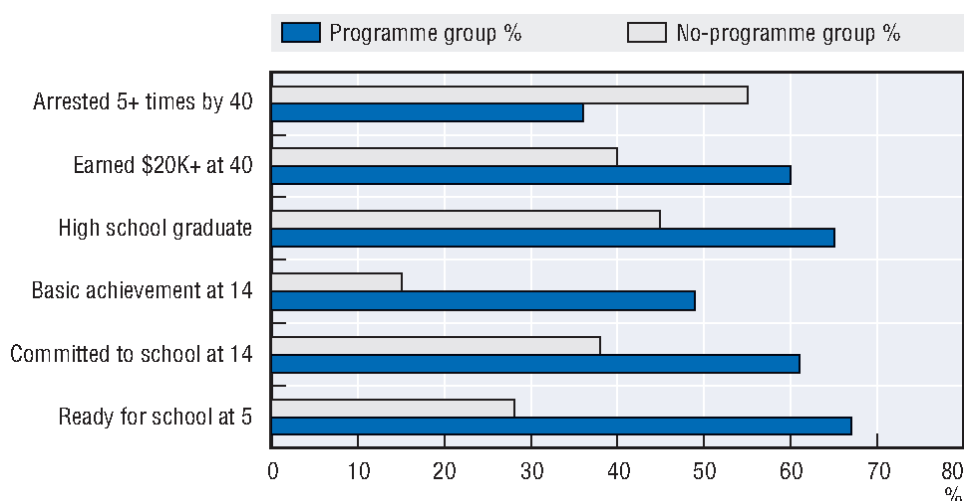
There are a number of studies indicating that investment in the early years would have substantial benefits. For example the Perry Preschool Project, and the Abecedarian Project have shown the possible benefits of high quality preschool education years for disadvantaged African-American children, and that the value of the benefits are far greater than the cost of preschool. These American studies clearly demonstrated benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for disadvantaged children, and they also indicated that it can make good economic sense for society.

The Perry preschool project was started as early as in the beginning of sixties, It consisted of activities lasting 2 -3 hours in workdays of school year, supplemented by home visits. Although the program was launched 70 years ago, it was quite modern even to today's standards. Children were involved also in planning of their activities and in the reflection about them. The adults were preparing the environment conducive to learning and were posing questions like "What happened?" How did you make it? Would you show it to another child or me?" The children were followed through the age of 40 together with a comparison group.

Professor Heckman's analysis of the Perry Preschool program shows a 7% to 10% per year return on investment based on increased school and career achievement as well as reduced costs in remedial education, health and criminal justice system expenditures. If re-invested and summed up through the active life, each dollar invested in 4 years of age would bring society 60-300 dollars back at the age of 65. It is very likely that many other early childhood programs are equally effective.

"There is no question that we can and should cut the federal deficit. The question is whether we have the courage to think differently, to shed our biases, to stop doing things that do not work, and to invest in things that do" (James Heckman, Taking on the Skills Deficit: A Message to the Super Committee, University of Chicago , Spotlight on poverty and opportunity (November 7, 2011).

***The Perry Preschool Study: the impact of early childhood education and care as measured in two randomized samples***



Source: OECD 2006, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD, Paris

There exist also large-scale longitudinal studies in Europe, such as **EPPE** (The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education) project. It is the first major study in the United Kingdom focusing specifically on the effectiveness of early years education. The EPPE project is a large scale, longitudinal study of the progress and development of 3,000 children in various types of pre-school education. Children were followed up to the National Assessment at age 7 (end of Key Stage1). In this project, children whose first language was not English, who had low birth weight, or who had 3 or more siblings, and boys, all did worse on cognitive development. Parent education and social class were also important influences upon child development and children from poor families did worse but the strongest effect of all was for the Home Learning Environment: with more frequent opportunities for learning activities at home, the child did better on all aspects: “*What parents do is more important than who parents are*”.

There were 3 key elements of a child’s environment for educational success found: 1. Good Home Learning Environment, Good preschools 3. Good primary schools.

It was found that from age 2 all children will benefit from preschool education, that the quality of preschool matters, that the duration of preschool matters in the early school years, part-time preschool has equal benefit to full-time, for medium and high quality preschool the benefit persist until at least the end of primary school, and high quality preschool can protect a child from consequences of attending low effective school. Preschool education leads to better educational attainment at age 7; although these effects diminished in size, they remained significant up to age 16. In adulthood, preschool experience was associated with an increased probability of obtaining qualifications, of being employed, and a 3-4% wage gain at 33.

Research in other parts of the world also supports the importance of preschool education for children’s later educational attainment, and the quality of life in general.<sup>1</sup>

Since February 2009, OFSTED in UK issued three reviews of highly successful schools in very challenging circumstances. *Twenty outstanding primary schools: excelling against the odds* (OFSTED and Peter Matthews, OFSTED 2009) examines a sample of primary schools, including infant and junior schools, which provide great service to highly disadvantaged communities in different parts of the country. Many of the characteristics of successful practice are common to schools in all phases. These

1 Early years experience and longer-term child development: research and implications for policymaking, oecd, document edu/edpc/eccec(2011)1

include appointing staff of the highest quality, investing in and developing them, treating children as individuals, listening to them, learning from them, supporting them and – last but not least - having high expectations about them. Staff are passionate about finding ways of doing things better – being focused on learning, development and progress, so critical self evaluation is a part of the school culture. High-quality leadership – strong and determined lead on equal opportunities - is essential. See also *Making the difference – teaching and learning strategies in successful Multi-ethnic schools-* Blair, M. and Bourne, J., Open University, 1998).

So schools can make a difference. After all, what is more important, what else are schools for if not for improving quality of life of both individual and society? But - how is it possible that the quality of life of societies in many countries and at a global scale is rather more and more divergent?

On 13<sup>th</sup> November, there is the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic* judgment. This case (No. 57325/00) was decided by the European Court of Human Rights, and the conclusion was that the applicants — 18 Romani students, former and then-attendants of special schools, represented by the European Roma Rights Centre — were discriminated against as they were educated in schools with limited, simplified curriculum, with strongly limited future in terms of their further education, employment and, consequently, in terms of their overall quality of life. The Court has declared the application admissible in part on Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination), combined with Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 (right to education) of the European Convention on Human Rights. The court also noted that these practices are not unique to the Czech Republic but are rather common to post-communist countries.

Five years on, the situation is not very different. Recent investigation by various agencies and institutions, including ombudsman office and Czech School inspectorate, confirmed that Roma students are still overrepresented in special schools, forming about 30% of all children enrolled there, while Roma constitute only 3% of the total population of the Czech Republic. Of course Roma students form a top of the iceberg only. The whole system is rather inequitable than equitable. The gaps between groups characterized by various kinds of disadvantage are widening.

### **What would bring about the change?**

It is not as difficult as bringing a piece of soil from the Moon. But in a sense, it is even more difficult. The crucial element is a paradigm change that would have to appear basically at all levels of the system.

As a recent research conducted by a Center for Research of Ethnicity and Culture in Slovakia pointed out, it is the majority society that is determining the rules for institutions and for the society relationships, and consequently evaluates these from its point of view. It takes for granted that its rules and values are universally valid. Majority culture thus creates a framework of what is “normal”. At a level of a school, it translates into perception that the school quality is taken for granted and the child either fits or does not fit the school, instead of school trying to fit all children.

The measures for improving equity, although evaluated as positive, are interpreted as helping children to get rid of what is perceived by the schools as a problem. Schools easily interpret their role as protecting children from influences of environment they come from.

For example, the assistants may be easily viewed as those who observe the order in the classroom so that the process of education is the business as usual”, rather than those who directly assist children for their learning.

The least effective and contradictory to the principle of inclusive education are financial measures (currently considered by politicians) that penalise school absenteeism by refusing to pay social welfare – so using sanctions instead of support.

Although these are the conclusion from Slovakian research, the situation in the Czech Republic is very similar. The outstanding primary and basic (primary plus lower secondary) schools, working inclusively *in spite of the exclusive system*, are not recognized and their policies and practices are not shared as good practice examples.

But yet, they exist... modelling the future system change.