

'Universal' early education: Who benefits? Patterns in take-up of the entitlement to free early education among three-year-olds in England ^[1]

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This article investigates disparities in access and take-up of the free entitlement to early education in England. Nationally, areas with high rates of child poverty had lower take-up rates compared with children in high-income areas. Ethnicity and household language are also strongly associated with non-take-up. School spaces and those within the voluntary sector were noticeably more popular and accessible among all groups compared with private-sector spaces.

Abstract

For over a decade, all three-year-olds in England have been entitled to a free part-time early education place. One aim of this policy is to close developmental gaps between higher-income and low-income children. However, the success of the initiative depends on children accessing the places. Using the National Pupil Database, we examine all autumn-born four-year-olds attending in January 2011, and ask whether they started attending when first eligible, in January 2010. One in five children did not access their free place from the beginning, and the proportion is much higher among children from families with persistently low incomes. We also find differences by ethnicity and home language, but these factors explain only a small share of the income gradient. We go on to explore associations between non-take-up and local area factors. In areas with higher child poverty rates, take-up is lower overall, but the gap between low-income and other families is smaller. There are also various associations between take-up and local proportions of different provider types (maintained, private, voluntary, Sure Start). In particular, the voluntary sector seems to have more flexibility than maintained provision to offer places in January, and more success than private providers in reaching children from lower-income backgrounds. The analysis also highlights how take-up overall is relatively high and the gap by income level is smaller in areas with more Sure Start provision. This suggests that aspects of Sure Start facilitated access among low-income families, and could perhaps be replicated as implementation of the free entitlement continues to be expanded.

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