

Is universal early childhood education and care an equalizer? A systematic review and meta-analysis of evidence ^[1]

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Abstract

Studies have shown that early investments improve outcomes for disadvantaged children. Targeted early childhood interventions aimed at vulnerable children have lasting positive impacts throughout the participants' life course, consequently reducing inequalities. However, results from targeted programs cannot be generalized to universal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Universal ECEC, available to all children, may increase inequalities given stratification in access to nationwide programs. In order to analyze whether universal ECEC has the same equalizing effects as the targeted programs, this study uses a systematic review and meta-analysis of quasi-experimental evidence to examine the impact of universal ECEC on children's outcomes throughout their lives, focusing on how it affects children from different socioeconomic statuses (SES). The findings indicate that universal ECEC is an effective policy strategy for equalization, as it reduces inequalities by benefiting more children from disadvantaged families. Low SES children benefit more in the non-cognitive domain than high SES children. Starting ECEC before age three improves the chances of better outcomes for disadvantaged children. The results demonstrate significant variability across regions, with European programs standing out in delivering positive outcomes for children from vulnerable backgrounds. The study emphasizes the importance of equitable access to universal ECEC to reduce inequalities and foster long-lasting positive impacts on children's development and life chances.

Related link: The impacts of childcare interventions on children's outcomes in low- and middle-income countries ^[3]

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