

The full impact of Sure Start cannot be measured [GB] ^[1]

Letters to the editor

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EXCERPTS

I am absolutely certain that Sure Start is providing vital services which improve the lives of children and families (Doubts over value of £3bn Sure Start, September 13). We are committed to building on Sure Start. As Sure Start children's centres are opened across the country they will improve access to programmes, offering high-quality early learning, health and family support services.

As your report made clear, this approach is supported by a wealth of research clearly demonstrating the benefits of good-quality early years programmes, particularly for children from disadvantaged families and communities.

As with other programmes, however, we make no apologies for evaluating Sure Start rigorously to make sure future policy is as effective as possible. We have already published several research papers and further findings will be published once work is completed later in the autumn. This will help us learn lessons, so that as we increase investment we can be sure that early years services make the maximum possible improvement to outcomes for children and their families.

- Beverley Hughes

Minister for children, young people and families

Large-scale programme evaluations of the kind Polly Toynbee admires have a long history of critical analyses in the US, but none in Britain. What those analyses almost invariably show is that national evaluators miss the nuance and the particularity of local action, so obsessed are they with imposing a one-size-fits-all measurement. Sure Start may be a national programme but it is locally defined and carried out, too diverse in its creative thinking and action to be apprehended by national evaluation teams.

If Ted Melhuish, the director of the Sure Start evaluation, is correct - that the school starting age of disadvantaged children needs lowering to two years, with the attendant Ofsted-type surveillance - then it flies in the face of everything early years educators would advise. It is tantamount to institutionalising the poor, stigmatising them and condemning them to the same achievement stodge Ofsted insists is fed to older children. That is not the lesson of Sure Start.

Rather, it tells us that conventional schooling - confined to classrooms, obsessed with test achievement and rote learning and not with understanding, in denial of community - misses the contemporary challenge.

- Prof Saville Kushner

University of the West of England

It is no defence of Sure Start that it failed to reach the researchers' sample of children. Nor is Polly Toynbee's observation that American Head Start children only "pulled away" in their teens. Sure Start was never better than a flashy cosmetic to cover up our chronic lack of public, skilled childcare. Its failure goes right to the heart of New Labour's project of ministering to the poor rather than confronting a savagely unfair distribution left by the Tories.

- Tom Snow

London

- reprinted from the Guardian

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