

Early years education is a class leveller, not an optional extra ^[1]

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Source: The Conversation

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 Mar 2014

EXCERPTS:

Learning certainly starts at birth, and some believe even before. Care by parents in the first three years of a child's life is absolutely critical in order to learn how to walk, talk, self-regulate, and self-maintain.

By three years of age, children are feeding and dressing themselves, have a reasonable vocabulary and a strong personality distinct from their parents and other children. By three, the social class gradient in exposure to language is also apparent: children from better off families have heard more words, use more complex grammar and have received more praise.

Disadvantage starts early for poorer children. And language development is critical to future success.

Can high-quality early education narrow the gap in language development, as well as social development, and thereby increase the chances of poorer children doing better at school later on? Yes and no.

High-quality early education does lead to better school outcomes, but the investment pays off the most if schools themselves are high quality. A child who has experienced a high-quality pre-school and primary school is more likely to do better than a child from the same social background who experienced high-quality early years but poor-quality primary education. Given that in England competition for "good" school places is intense, ensuring all children have access to high-quality education throughout their school years is critically important.

The Global Education and Skills Forum taking place in Dubai in March has a one-hour session on early education. On the one hand, it is good news that this huge international gathering is interested in early years. On the other, why are we still under pressure to make the case?

What is good pre-school care?

What does quality look like in pre-school provision? There are a range of factors that affect quality falling into two basic categories: the quality of the pedagogy and the structural factors that impinge on pedagogy. The structure of the school is considerably easier to influence through policy than its quality.

Quality pedagogy with small children includes responsive care giving, secure attachments, play-based activities and routines, support for language development and opportunities for physical activity. Structural factors include adult-to-child ratios, group size, physical space, and staff qualifications. It is this final factor, the training and support for staff, that has the biggest influence on the quality of the pedagogy.

Better pay needed

So why do some countries, including England, struggle to deliver the quality early years education young children need to make a difference to longer-term outcomes? The simple answer is lack of adequate investment. Early education is a classic example where money is essential to solve a problem but is not sufficient on its own without clear goals.

Subsidies to parents to help them pay for childcare encourage flexibility of provision, but do not encourage quality. England has relied largely on demand-side subsidies through tax credits paid to parents. Subsidies to providers, particularly if contingent on quality factors like well-trained staff, are a better lever for quality.

While England has done particularly well with a guaranteed free early education place of 15 hours per week for all three and four-year-olds, it still lags behind Nordic countries in terms of qualified staff for early years education, particularly graduate leadership. A move to extend care for more two-year-olds by this September is welcome, but schools may not be ready.

Wages are low and career progression limited, so early education is not likely to attract the most able candidates. The social class gradient that determines outcomes for us all is replicated in an education system that pays the most to those teaching the most privileged, university students and pays the least to those working with the youngest children.

If early education is meant to narrow the gap in outcomes between the poorest and the rest, those who work with the youngest and often the poorest children should not be the least well-paid of all teachers.

-reprinted from the Conversation

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