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Inequalities in the experience of early education in England: Access, peer groups and transitions

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Key findings and policy recommendations

There are long-standing disparities in child development between children from different backgrounds. Progress in narrowing gaps is slow and differences remain wide, especially by household income. This Nuffield Foundation-funded project examined three aspects of children's experience of early education that have been relatively overlooked to date but might be contributing to persistent disparities. It looked at access to free early education places, at peer group composition in pre-school, and at children's experience of onward transition to reception class.

Take-up and access

(1) Take-up of the full duration of free early education is much lower among low-income families. Three-year-olds from persistently poor families are twice as likely as higher-income peers not to access free pre-school from the start of eligibility.

Recommendation: The Department for Education must reassess how to ensure good quality early education for *all* children, with a focus on access for low-income children. This is especially urgent given the new policy of 30 hours funding for children of working parents, which is likely to increase inequality.

(2) Where more pre-school places are in Sure Start children's centres, take-up of pre-school education is higher overall and there is less inequality in take-up between different income groups. Voluntary sector provision is also associated with higher take-up across income groups.

Recommendation: Local authorities should be supported to ensure that a minimum share of local provision is available in Sure Start and voluntary sector settings. The government must urgently review funding for Sure

Start, given numerous closures due to inadequate resources. It should also review funding mechanisms to better protect the voluntary sector.

Peer-groups

(3) In 2011, there was very little segregation of low-income children in early education. Only 3% of those from persistently poor families attended preschools with a majority of peers whose families were also persistently poor. On the other hand, compared to primary school, many pre-school settings included no low-income children.

Recommendation: Policymakers should continue to monitor levels of mixing. Free early education appears to be working reasonably well to ensure a social mix in many pre-schools, but since our data were collected, the funding context has changed considerably. Widespread closures of voluntary sector and Sure Start providers, and additional fees charged by private sector providers due to funding gaps may have affected intakes.

(4) We find very little evidence that peer group in early education affects the measured attainment of low-income children in early primary school. We also find no significant associations between the share of a child's peers who had English as an Additional Language (EAL) and EAL children's recorded attainment in reception.

Recommendation: Researchers and policymakers should continue to investigate peer effects. It may be that our outcome measure, the Foundation Stage Profile score, is not sufficiently fine-grained to identify effects.

Transitions

(5) Summer-born children are slightly less likely than autumn-borns to attend a school nursery, and therefore more likely to move to a different institution for reception, and more likely to enter primary school with no peers known from pre-school. This is of particular concern given summer-born children are known to be at a disadvantage through their educational careers, both in terms of attainment and socially and emotionally.

Recommendation: The Department for Education and Local Authorities should consider how to increase access to school nurseries for summer-born children. This may include more active and earlier information and signposting, and reviewing admissions processes with a specific focus on ensuring equal access for all.

(6) Children from some minority ethnic groups, especially Black Caribbean children, as well as children with a statement of special educational needs, are more likely than other children to move from a school nursery to a different setting for reception - a potentially avoidable disruptive transition.

Recommendation: Local authorities should investigate and address these disparities, and be given the resources to enable them to do so.

Project aims

Our project sought to further our understanding of how Early Education and Care (ECEC) could do more to level the playing field between children of different backgrounds, by examining three aspects of children's experience that have been relatively overlooked to date:

Access to and take-up of free pre-school education. While take-up among three-year-olds is generally assumed to be near universal, there are quite significant levels of non-take-up of the full duration of the entitlement, as not all children access their places as soon as they become eligible. We explore whether patterns of take-up differ by children's background, and ask whether the types of pre-schools available locally seem to make a difference.

Peer group composition. The group of peers with whom children attend nursery has received very little attention as an aspect of their experience, yet children in early education spend a large share of their time interacting, giving them opportunities to learn from and mimic each other. We look at the extent of clustering of children from low-income households and from households where English is an Additional Language (EAL) and go on to ask how far peer group in pre-school is associated with children's reported outcomes in early primary school.

Transition patterns from early education to reception class.

Transition to primary school is increasingly believed to be a crucial stage in children's trajectories, with both short- and long-term consequences for wellbeing and progress through school. We conduct some provisional analysis on the different likelihoods by income, ethnicity, language background, birth month and special educational needs / disabilities (SEND) of a more or less stable transition.

Policy background

Our project is focused on the universal ‘free entitlement’ to early education – the free 15 hours a week for which all children aged three and four in England have been eligible since April 2004. Children are entitled to access funded places at the start of the term after their third birthday: January 1 for children born in autumn, April 1 for those born in spring, and September 1 for the summer-born. The places can be taken up in any setting registered to deliver the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum, which includes maintained nursery schools and primary school nursery classes, day nurseries run by the private, local authority or voluntary sector (some of them within Sure Start children’s centres), childminders, and sessional (part-day) providers, including independent nursery schools and private and voluntary sector playgroups. Since 2017, children of working parents can access an additional 15 hours a week for free, but this policy did not affect the children in our data.

There are a number of reasons why children might attend one setting rather than another, and these are relevant in considering both variations in take-up and the potential for clustering of children from similar backgrounds. First, some settings are open for a longer day (e.g. 8am to 6pm), charging fees for additional hours. These are likely to be more attractive to working parents than those open for shorter hours. In fact, a child with parents in paid work may already be attending a day nursery when she turns three, and the entitlement will operate simply as a reduction in fees. Conversely, children whose parents do not need or cannot afford additional hours may find it harder to access full-day settings. Second, parents may simply have a preference for one type of provision over another: for non-working parents, school-based places may seem like provision aimed at the child, while day nursery may be perceived as ‘childcare’ and not necessary. Third, some providers may be better than others at communicating the existence of free places and their potential benefits, particularly to low-income families. Sure Start

children's centres, for example, offer wider services for young children and parents from birth onwards, which mean they have long-term contact with families, and they also have a specific remit of outreach to disadvantaged groups.

Finally there are substantial differences in the make-up of provision across local authority areas. Almost all new places created since 1997 were in private and voluntary sector settings, which means that maintained settings form a significant share of the total only in local authorities that invested in state nursery provision in previous decades; these are largely concentrated in inner cities. The prevalence of both voluntary sector and Sure Start children's centre provision also varies widely across local authorities. These differences are useful in our analysis, for example allowing us to investigate whether differences in what is available to parents makes a difference to access and take-up, either overall or among particular groups.

Methodology

The project uses records from the National Pupil Database (NPD), a census conducted every January which tracks all children in England who access state-funded education. For some of our analysis we also link in data on each early education centre's results from their most recent Ofsted inspection, as well as area-level measures of child poverty using the 2011 Index of Deprivation Affecting Children (IDACI).

We examine children born in the 2006-07 academic year, who became eligible for free early education between January 2010 and September 2010. We focus on children attending in January 2011, when the full cohort are eligible for a free place, and on their peer groups at that point. We track children forward into early primary school to gather data on their outcomes in formal teacher-recorded assessments at the end of reception year (FSP scores) and Year 2 (Key Stage 1 results), and to construct our low-income measure. Low-income children are defined as

those who claim Free School Meals (FSM) in reception, Year 1, and Year 2 ('always FSM'). We also identify those who never or sometimes claim FSM ('never FSM' / 'sometimes FSM').

We have 553,327 children in our main sample, nested in 24,727 settings. This includes all children attending funded early education in January 2011 except those who: i) were enrolled in centres with fewer than five cohort peers or in home-based provision (N=9,377); or ii) had missing information on outcome measures, because, for example, they entered the private sector for formal schooling (N=54,941).

Findings and Recommendations

Access and take-up of the free entitlement

We find sharp differences in take up of the full duration of the free entitlement by income group, EAL and ethnicity. Among 'always FSM' children, 29% do not take up their place from the beginning, compared to 15% of children who never claim FSM. Among children with EAL, 39% did not take up the places, compared to 14% of those with English as a first language. There is high non-take-up among some minority ethnic groups but also among persistently poor White British households.

The free early education policy is therefore offering the greatest subsidy to children who are already doubly advantaged. In part this is by design: autumn-babies have the right to five terms rather than three for summer-borns. But on top of this, this advantage seems to work mostly in favour of children who are less disadvantaged by economic circumstances at home, who are most likely to take up the full five terms. The inequality will have been further exacerbated by the extension of funding to 30 hours for children of working parents.

We also find that the make-up of pre-school provision in a local authority makes a difference to take-up. Where there is a larger voluntary sector, we find higher access overall, and where there are more places in Sure

Start children's centres we find higher access and considerably less inequality in take-up between different income groups. These findings may reflect better outreach and lower barriers to entry such as registration fees in these settings, compared to the private sector, alongside more flexibility to offer January entry than the maintained sector. In the case of Sure Start, families may have attended health services or toddler groups at the centre from pregnancy onwards, improving both information and trust.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Department of Education reviews the operation of the universal policy to ensure that children from low-income families have equal access to provision. This is particularly urgent in the wake of the introduction of the 30 hours policy.

We also recommend that resources are provided to protect places in the voluntary sector and in Sure Start children's centres. Local authorities should be supported to ensure that a minimum share of provision must be offered by these settings. Since our data were collected, cuts to local government budgets and changes to funding formulae are known to have led to the closure of a significant amount of Sure Start provision and challenged the viability of some voluntary sector providers. This is of significant concern.

Peer group clustering and peer effects

We find some evidence of mild clustering of children in pre-school by income-level: low-income children are more likely to attend centres with more similarly low-income peers than high-income children are. However, in very few centres are low-income children a majority: just 3% of children from low-income households attend provision where more than half of their peers are also low-income. Comparing peer composition in pre-school to year 1 of primary school, we find that patterns are very similar. The main difference is that some higher-income children do not

appear to mix with any low-income peers in early education (24%) and this is less true in primary school (13%). Clustering by EAL is more common: just over half of EAL children have a majority of peers who are also EAL.

We find very little evidence that the proportion of pre-school peers who are from low-income households affects low-income children's outcomes, at least as measured by their Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) scores from the end of reception year (age five). There are small negative associations in the raw data, but these largely disappear once individual, centre and area characteristics are controlled for. In particular, controlling for the level of child poverty in the family's residential area substantially reduces any association between peer make-up and outcomes. Similar children score less well if they come from higher poverty areas, but peer make-up in early education does not appear to be a mechanism.

Despite higher levels of clustering, we find even less evidence of any association between the level of EAL peers and an EAL child's outcomes as recorded in the FSP. This is also true when we focus on scores for communication, language and literacy, outcomes we might expect to be most affected by children's language background.

Recommendations

Policymakers should continue to monitor the extent of peer-group clustering, as changes in the funding context may have affected pre-school intakes and possibly increased clustering by background.

We also recommend that researchers continue to explore peer effects, ideally using alternative, multi-dimensional measures of development. The FSP score may not be sufficiently nuanced or fine-grained to allow effects to be picked up, especially given that they are likely to be fairly small. There are many ways in which peer groups may matter for children's experience and broad social, academic and psychological development which are not captured in the score.

Transition to primary school

For children who are 'never FSM', the most common transition between pre-school and reception is from a non-school setting to a school that had no nursery provision (a move made by 46% of 'never FSM' children, compared to 23% of 'always FSM' children). In contrast, low-income children are most likely to move from a school nursery class to reception in the same school (48% of 'always FSM' children, compared to 30% of 'never FSM'). The latter trajectory provides the greatest stability and familiarity of both environment and peer group. That low-income children are most likely to experience this smoother transition is possibly a (unintended?) benefit of the fact that school nurseries are disproportionately concentrated in disadvantaged areas.

On the other hand, our analysis also picks up ways in which the system creates a greater likelihood of disruption for some more disadvantaged groups. First, there is something about the operation of school nursery admissions that results in fewer summer-born than autumn-born children in these settings. The knock-on effect is a higher likelihood of a more disruptive transition and a less familiar peer group for children who are younger in the year and therefore already at a disadvantage: they have received fewer terms of free pre-school than their older peers, and they are making a move at an earlier age.

Second, among children who start in school nurseries, some groups are more likely than others to move to a different school for reception. Some 25% of Black Caribbean children who attend a school nursery in our year of interest move for reception, compared to 17% of White British children. And 26% of children with a Statement of Special Educational Needs move, compared to 18% of children with no recorded SEND. This small disparity in experience potentially makes a key transition point more difficult for these children, compounding rather than offsetting other sources of inequality.

Recommendations

The Department for Education and Local Authorities should consider how to increase access to school nurseries for summer-born children. This may include more active and earlier information and signposting, and reviewing admissions processes with a specific focus on ensuring equal access for all. Local Authorities should be empowered to investigate and address higher levels of transitions between schools for some minority ethnic groups and children with SEND. This means ensuring authorities are adequately funded and that, at the policy-level, the system does not impose perverse incentives that discourage schools from admitting certain groups of children. Recent funding cuts and reforms have reduced authorities' capacity to take action to understand and address inequalities in early years provision.

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Some of the analysis presented has already been published elsewhere. See (1) T. Campbell, L. Gambaro and K. Stewart (2018) "'Universal" early education: Who benefits? Patterns in take-up of the entitlement to free early education among three-year-olds in England,' *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(3), pp 515-538, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/berj.3445>; and (2) K. Stewart, T. Campbell and L. Gambaro (2019) 'The peer composition of pre-school settings in England and early recorded attainment among low-income children,' *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, online first, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01425692.2019.1583549>

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The authors welcome comments, questions, and press enquiries.

A fuller version of this report is available on the CASE website – <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/casepaper214.pdf>.

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