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What will narrow inequalities in child development before school entry?

Policies should aim to ensure an even playing field for children before starting formal schooling. Early disparities in children's skills and well-being are difficult to compensate for and have long-term implications.

Focusing on equity of participation in early care and education is not enough to eliminate early inequalities. The intensity and the quality of care and education also matter.

Early childhood policies should pay attention to the needs and aspirations of vulnerable families as defined within their context. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of responsiveness are fundamental to setting policy priorities.

Policies (and practices) on early childhood should empower parents to support their children outside the childcare setting. Children need the opportunity to learn, play, explore and communicate, and for that, ensuring adequate family income and housing conditions is vital.

Introduction

Investments in young children play a critical role in assisting reducing future inequalities, poverty and health risks. Large developmental disparities, linked to socio-economic status (SES), which precede the start of formal schooling, hinder the ability of education and learning systems to produce equal outcomes for all. How can we better support families with young children today to decrease inequalities among future generations? In November 2022, the Open Research Area DICE (Development of Inequalities in Child Educational Achievement) project organised a High-Level Experts Meeting to discuss this subject with eminent scholars and stakeholders.

Participants in the meeting included: **Albert Arcarons Feixas** (Deputy Director at the Office of the High Commissioner Against Child Poverty in the Presidency of the Spanish Government), **Stuart Duffin** (CEO of Relationships Glasgow), **Naomi Feely** (Senior Policy and Research Officer at Children's Rights Alliance), **Alissa Goodman** (Professor of Economics, Director of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies and Co-Director of the Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study, University College London), **Lidia Panico** (Tenured Researcher at the Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques), **C. Katharina Spiess** (Director of the German Federal Institute for Population Research/BIB and Professor of Population Economics at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz), **Jan Skopek** (Associate Professor and Head of Department at the Department of Sociology of Trinity College Dublin), **Kitty Stewart** (Associate Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science and Associate Director of the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion – CASE), **Liz Washbrook** (Principal Investigator for the DICE Project and Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Bristol), and other experts that preferred to stay anonymous.

The DICE project (<https://dice.site.ined.fr/>) uses parental education as a summary indicator of social background and explores how the disparities between education groups – in terms of resources available to children, and children's cognitive, socioemotional and health outcomes – evolve over the life course in six high-income countries: France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, the UK and the US. A summary of DICE's studies relating to the preschool period was presented at the meeting. First, evidence was shown on the social grading in a range of mechanisms that potentially link parental education to child outcomes such as birth weight, breastfeeding, post-partum depression, childcare participation and disposable family income.

Second, direct evidence on inequalities in children's health, language skills and socio-emotional outcomes at age 3 was reported. Finally, some analyses were presented on the specific mechanisms that link parental background to children's development in different domains (Volodina et al., 2022). On virtually all indicators – and in all countries – children in the low SES group lagged behind those in the highest SES group. There were variations, however, in the extent to which the middle SES group also had poorer indicators than the higher group, and in the magnitude of disparities across countries.

Therefore, the macro context appears to play an important role in how parental advantages translate into children's living conditions, developmental outcomes, skills and future opportunities for social mobility. Also, results indicate that large inequalities in early life conditions are not inevitable: some countries are better than others at limiting disparities in some domains and for some groups. How can policies be successful in protecting the early development of all children? This policy brief presents key elements derived from the dialogue amongst and with the invited experts.

The case for targeting inequalities in the preschool period is compelling

Foundational skills are multidimensional: they involve socioemotional well-being, resilience, physical health and cognitive skills, among others. There are vast amounts of research evidence illustrating that disparities in child development are already evident before entry into formal schooling and that these are challenging to redress throughout schooling and lifelong learning. Indeed, there is little evidence of countries that managed to reverse early inequalities in achievement once children are in compulsory schooling. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence indicating the importance of societal structural factors, such as poverty and housing, in producing early childhood inequalities (Cattan et al., 2022).

To tackle inequalities, it is vital that policy-makers and practitioners, take a holistic view of early childhood (education, learning and care) and approach child development beyond formal means. We must consider the whole environment, including parents, home and the communities in which we live. This became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a profound effect on children's speaking, listening and understanding skills due to a lack of opportunities to socialise and be part of their communities. Participants

in our meeting highlighted the importance of monitoring socio-emotional and listening skills, resilience, relaxation, observation and the ability to inquire below the age of four as an instrument to identify vulnerabilities in early childhood.

Considering the needs of vulnerable families

The general consensus in our discussions was that, for equity reasons, greater support should be provided to those more in need. Vulnerability is linked to many factors beyond income and education (e.g. housing and material deprivation, urban/rural location, language/migration status, non-standard working, precarious working, parental skills, advocacy/voice, and mental health). The relative importance of these factors varies depending on the context, and are shaped by additional factors such as the policy environment and the cost of living crisis at both the national and community levels. Also, participants in our meeting highlighted that vulnerabilities change over time. This has become particularly important in more recent times, where global instability impacts the resilience of national and local environments (social and financial).

Finally, families lack not only resources but also the chance to access spaces and opportunities. Disadvantaged families are often seen as those with lower education and/or lacking enough income to make ends meet. However, a broader perspective is needed to include family needs as well as the provision of quality and accessible publicly funded services. Families from low-income backgrounds often face difficulties in accessing public support. Ensuring those in need have access to the highest quality services is still a challenge in many countries and regions, and more efforts in this direction are needed to ensure equality of opportunities. There is also a need to improve and enhance cooperation between administrations and service providers working on early childhood.

Towards leaving no one behind

The DICE project has shown that while the low SES group often lagged behind, the middle SES group was sometimes (but not always) at a disadvantage compared to the high SES group. Participants in our meeting discussed how policy targeting needs to be flexible and respond to different levels of need, which may be defined in a variety of ways. Furthermore, it has been noted that 'cliff-edged' cut-offs

are damaging to those with vulnerabilities who do not qualify on the basis of a single indicator. Therefore, a more nuanced approach is required. This is challenging from a policy perspective, as many policies supporting children and their families use thresholds to define public access. Practitioners mentioned, for instance, that middle-income families in non-standard (precarious) jobs (for example temporary employment, part-time, shift and on-call work) often cut back on children's activities like childcare, playgroups, school trips or family outings when facing financial difficulties. Ensuring publicly funded and universal access to certain core child-related activities is of pivotal importance in this context.

Also, thresholds are problematic for institutions providing education. For example, evidence has shown that schools that fall just below the cut-off in inspectorate judgements, where improvements are required, see extra support and improved outcomes; schools just above the cut-off see no additional support coupled with deteriorating performance. Whilst working with thresholds might be efficient for policymakers, they come with costs in terms of perpetuating inequalities.

Access to early childhood education and care is not enough

High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) contributes to child development. The DICE project illustrated that access to crucial (and critical) resources for child development, such as ECEC programs, is very different across countries, and social disparities therein are varied. For example, while social disparities in access to ECEC in the US start relatively small in magnitude and increase across the early childhood period, in France and the Netherlands, the opposite was observed.

Access to early care and education is, however, not enough. Childcare intensity (the number of hours children attend formal childcare – and learning – per week) and quality of care (e.g. number of teachers, pedagogical practices and appropriate age-specific settings) also exert an influence on the extent to which the ECEC contributes to decreasing inequalities among children before they enter compulsory education. Finally, as previously mentioned, home and early-relational aspects within the community play an important role in child development and should not be neglected in policies and practices on early childhood. Informal learning and play are fundamental to all children's educational and social development.

Policy recommendations

- Policies should aim to create and ensure an even playing field for children before starting formal schooling. Early disparities in skills, in children's sense of curiosity, security and confidence become difficult to compensate for and have grave developmental implications over time and throughout the lifespan.
- Focusing on equity of participation in early care, learning and education is not enough to eliminate early inequalities. Intensity and quality of care and education also matter, particularly for those whose development is falling behind.
- Early childhood policies ought to pay attention to the needs and aspirations of vulnerable families as defined within their context. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of responsiveness are fundamental to understanding where and when help is required the most.
- Policies (and practices) on early childhood should empower parents to support their children outside the childcare setting, particularly when children are aged 0–2. Children need the opportunity to learn, play, explore and communicate, and for that, ensuring adequate family income and housing conditions is vital.

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