

Nuffield Foundation response to the call for evidence from the joint inquiry into the Government's life chances strategy

1. Introduction

This submission is made in response to the call for evidence on:

- the relationship between early years education and the life chances strategy; and
- cross-departmental co-ordination on early years interventions and interaction with the benefits system and public services.

The relationship between education and life chances is a central theme of the Nuffield Foundation's work and we have funded many projects in this area. However, it is also important to note that education continues to influence life chances through all stages of compulsory schooling and into further and higher education. In addition, other interventions, such as child protection services, can have a significant effect on life chances, and while we recognise those are outside the scope of this particular inquiry, we think it is important to highlight that early years education – while crucial – is not the *only* intervention relevant to life chances. We have included details of other relevant research at the end of this submission (section 5).

2. Key points from evidence in relation to early years education and childcare and child outcomes

A review of the work we have funded in early years education and childcare (Hillman and Williams 2015) led us to conclude the following in relation to child outcomes:

- When early years settings are of *high quality*, there are positive effects on a range of child outcomes that are sustained well into the teenage years. However, when we look across provision as a whole, the effects are much more modest and fade out over the course of the primary phase of schooling. There are a number of possible explanations, but it is likely that a combination of two factors in particular have played a part: improvements to primary education may have dampened any effect of early years education and childcare; and the variable quality of provision may have limited the potential impact.
- The evidence that might be used to support further expansion of public funding of early years education and childcare is far from conclusive and in light of this, the government should focus on making the most effective use of existing funding to improve incentives for higher quality care, whilst at the same time improving the evidence base that might support any future funding expansion.
- In looking at what drives quality (and in turn has positive effects on child outcomes), the level of staff qualifications is key. In the private and voluntary sector, where

quality is lower overall, providers with better qualified staff are more likely to provide higher quality care, whatever the level of advantage or disadvantage of their intake of children. But across all providers, it is specifically graduate leadership that is associated with a narrower gap in measures of quality between those settings located in the most and least deprived areas. This is an important finding, but we do not know nearly enough about whether it is the skills that graduates have developed through their higher education that are playing a part, nor about how the skills of graduates are best deployed in early years settings.

- Also in relation to quality, there is evidence that a particular focus on early oral language skills is a crucial precursor for later language and literacy development and other aspects of 'school-readiness'.
- It is important to recognise the wider impact of early years education on life chances beyond the direct experiences of children in these settings. For example, maternal employment is an important factor in early years education and childcare policy. Changes in the rate of maternal employment can lead to an increase in family income, which is itself associated with better children's outcomes, particularly for those who are less well-off.

The evidence which informs these conclusions is summarised in the section below.

3. Early years education and childcare projects funded by the Nuffield Foundation

Mathers and Smees (2014) found that where children attend early years settings in government-maintained schools, there is no difference in quality between those in deprived areas and those in better off areas, and in some cases, quality of provision in the maintained sector is higher in more deprived areas. However, in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector quality was lower in deprived areas. This was particularly the case with regard to support for languages and literacy, and provision for diversity and individual needs, which is a concern because these aspects of quality are essential for addressing the attainment gap between affluent and disadvantaged children.

Mathers and Smees also found that the difference in quality was narrower where there was a well-qualified staff team, including graduate leadership. In light of this, they recommended that the government should encourage PVI providers to spend the new pupil premium on employing graduate-level staff and introduce a phased requirement for all early years staff to be qualified to at least the equivalent of A level standard (Level 3). Further work is needed, though, on how best to upskill the early years workforce and to ensure better qualified staff are appropriately deployed.

Blanden, Del Bono, Hansen, and Rabe (2014) conducted an evaluation of the government's free early education entitlement for three- and four-year olds and found that free part-time nursery places for three-year-olds enabled some children to do better in assessments at the end of Reception, but overall educational benefits were small and did not last. They also found that between 1999 and 2007 for every six children given a free place only one additional child began to use early education, and that while there was modest evidence that the policy had more impact on the poorest, most disadvantaged

children, the policy did not close the gap in attainment between those from richer and poorer families in the longer term.

Gambaro, Stewart and Waldfogel (2013) have shown that there is little evidence that better off parents are spending more to buy higher quality provision, which indicates that competition cannot be relied on to bid up quality in a market for childcare. Providers appear to be competing on price – perhaps because quality is hard to observe – which emphasises the importance of the state’s role in driving quality improvements through regulation. They argue that there are many strengths to the way early years education and childcare is currently provided in England, including near universal take-up of free early education for three- and four-year-olds, and relatively high quality provision for children in disadvantaged areas, due largely to the concentration of maintained nursery schools and classes in those areas. However, they also suggest that improvement is required with respect to three areas.

1. There are insufficient graduate staff in the sector (among three-year-olds, almost 40 per cent access the free entitlement in a setting where there is no graduate), and this marks the UK out from the higher level of quality provided in Norway and France.
2. Subsidies for younger children and for hours outside the free entitlement do not reach the most disadvantaged children and cover too little of the costs. Other countries make early years education and childcare cheaper, and do so for a larger proportion of parents. To reach the most disadvantaged children, subsidies should be income-related and should include non-working parents, both because the children in these households may have most to gain from some formal provision, and because this can help parents make a gradual transition into employment.
3. Funding mechanisms should be designed so as to encourage and support settings to improve quality, and to enable parents to choose quality, while settings in disadvantaged areas should also be supported by additional supply side funding, similar to the pupil premium.

We have also funded research that has identified some of the underlying mechanisms related to the development of cognitive skills, including the evaluation of some promising intervention programmes related to language development. These programmes have the potential to help children who may already be struggling, or at risk of falling behind their peers from more advantaged backgrounds.

The Nuffield Early Language Intervention was originally developed by a team of researchers at the University of York with funding from the Nuffield Foundation, and has been adapted by researchers at University College London. It is an oral language intervention for children in nursery and reception who are at risk of experiencing difficulty with reading. The intervention is delivered over 30 weeks by teaching assistants who are given three days of training and detailed lesson plans so they can lead short, structured sessions, often around everyday topics like ‘time’ and ‘what we wear’, with small groups of pupils. Rewarding the children was an integral feature of each session, from targeted verbal praise to more formal incentives like a ‘Best Listener Award’, given to the child that has listened well in the class. A recent evaluation funded by the Education Endowment Foundation found that the 30-week programme improved the vocabulary, grammar and listening skills of four and five-year olds by as much as four months (Sibieta 2016).

Swain, Cara, Vorhaus and Litster (2015) examined the impact of family literacy programmes on the reading and writing skills and literacy practices at home of children in Years 1 and 2. They found that the programmes had a positive effect on children's reading, compared to children who did not participate. Participating parents reported increased understanding of school literacy processes and pedagogies over the course of the intervention. The researchers concluded that family literacy programmes provide a wide range of benefits for family literacy providers, schools, parents and their children, arguing that there is a strong case for maintaining and supporting these programmes.

Holliman (2016) examined how children's sensitivity to acoustic patterns in speech such as intonation, loudness and tempo (known as speech rhythm) influence reading and spelling amongst four and five-year-old pre-readers. Holliman found that pre-readers' sensitivity to speech rhythm indirectly predicted word reading and spelling abilities primarily through an influence on phonological awareness. This finding suggests that interventions designed to improve speech rhythm sensitivity could be incorporated into approaches to teach literacy, and that assessments of speech rhythm sensitivity might help earlier identification of children who are at risk of developing reading difficulties.

Research has also identified some of the potential benefits of cross-departmental approaches to providing early years education and childcare, and supporting parents to participate in education. For example, **Callender, Hawkins, Jackson, Jamieson, Land and Smith (2014)** conducted a small scale evaluation of innovative Higher Education (HE) courses for student parents run by Birkbeck, University of London and the Open University. These courses were designed to meet the challenges faced by student parents in accessing and completing HE courses and were delivered at sites with childcare (in the form of Sure Start Children's Centres). The inclusive teaching approaches were considered effective by students, with many feeling more confident about gaining further qualifications. Findings from the study also highlighted the importance of tailored approaches to adult learning, in particular the value of joining up policies such as childcare and education to provide more integrated ways of engaging groups that have traditionally been excluded and help widen participation.

Lyonette, Atfield, Behle and Gambin (2015) tracked student mothers' participation in HE and their early careers following study. The authors found that inequalities did not appear to break down as a result of going to university. Whilst some student mothers can and do achieve social mobility by progressing into a better job than before, this group of students experienced relatively poor social mobility, in comparison with other female students. The majority of mothers valued the whole HE experience and felt that it benefited them in terms of increased self-confidence, self-fulfilment and an ability to help their own children make decisions on higher education. However, after studying, mothers tended to compromise their longer-term ambition to use what they had learnt at HE, by instead devoting more time to their children and partners and fitting work around these commitments.

4. The Nuffield Foundation's priorities in early years education and childcare

In 2015 the Foundation published a report that summarised the lessons from evidence and set out our priorities for further research in the field of early years education and childcare (Hillman and Williams 2015). These priorities are:

- **Impact on children's outcomes.** We want to improve our understanding of the impact of early years education and childcare on educational attainment and broader child development outcomes, and the mechanisms through which this is achieved. This is critical to the design and evaluation of formal interventions.
- **Tackling social disadvantage.** We have a particular interest in understanding the extent to which variations in attainment and other outcomes at school entry are underpinned by broader structural differences in society, and the potential role that early years education and childcare might play in narrowing these gaps.
- **The parental and family context.** We are interested in the potential for early years education and childcare to improve the quality of parenting and family childcare, both as an objective in its own right and because of the potential consequences for improved children's outcomes. What are the opportunities to improve the home learning environment and to better integrate early years education and childcare with other services?
- **Wider societal impacts.** What are the costs and benefits of early years education and childcare and how are these distributed across different sections of society? This includes employers and other beneficiaries as well as families with children under five.
- **Public policy mechanisms.** There is an urgent need to improve our understanding of the early years 'market', and in particular the workings of private and voluntary sector providers, to inform the design and focus of future policies to improve quality.

Research that is underway on these issues includes:

- Work by Professor Anne West examining government expenditure, policy and local implementation of funding policy <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/public-funding-early-years-education-england>
- Work by Dr Kitty Stewart examining the patterns, drivers, and outcomes of segregation by socioeconomic group and ethnicity in early education <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/segregation-early-years-settings-patterns-drivers-and-outcomes>
- A project led by Dr Danielle Matthews, Dr Jane Herbert and Professor Julian Pine investigating whether one type of parental communication, contingent talk, is linked to better language development, whether it is possible to design an intervention to promote language growth, and how an intervention may work differently for families in disadvantaged and more affluent circumstances <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/does-promoting-parents%E2%80%99-contingent-talk-benefit-language-development>
- Dr Jo Van Herwegen and Dr Chris Donlan are examining which preschool children are at risk of difficulties learning maths and whether organised game based

interventions can help develop number skills before children start primary school.
<http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/improving-preschoolers-number-foundations>

5. Other influences on life chances

As mentioned in our introduction, early years education is a crucial factor in relation to life chances, but it is not the only one. While we appreciate other areas are outside the scope of this inquiry, we think it would be useful to highlight some key evidence relevant to life chances.

The Foundation's **Changing Adolescence Programme** which reported in 2012 found that the experience of teenagers has changed considerably over the last 30-40 years, including a significant increase in the rate of anxiety, depression and behaviour problems. In addition to increased levels of anxiety and depression, today's teenagers are more likely to be in education and less likely to be in paid employment than their counterparts in the 70s and 80s, leading to a longer and less structured period of adolescence. The findings highlighted that there is growing evidence that many of the courses accounting for the increased participation in post-16 education do not provide the genuine skills and training alongside structure and socialisation necessary to improve life chances.

Sebba, Berridge, Luke, Fletcher and others (2015) examined the key factors that influence the educational attainment of children in care. They found that children who are fostered make better educational progress than children in need (children living with their families while receiving social work support). Also, in general, the longer they are in care the better they do in comparison to young people 'in need' but not in care. By the age of 16, children in foster care or kinship care achieved GCSEs at least six grades higher, on average, than children in other forms of care. In addition, the researchers' analysis shows much less difference between local authorities than is generally assumed.

Two projects that are still underway are also relevant here:

- Professor Paul Bywaters' mixed methods comparative study across the four UK countries which aims to map and understand inequalities in child welfare intervention rates. It extends and tests findings from his pilot study (also funded by the Foundation) which indicated that not only were children living in deprived areas more likely to be on a child protection plan or looked after by the state, but also that a child living in a more affluent locality was more likely to get help from social services than a similar child living in a less affluent area. Some of this work – on the specific relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect – will be published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation this spring, and the project will report in full in 2017. For further details see: <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/inequalities-child-welfare-intervention-rates>
- Professor Karen Broadhurst's study of care proceedings cases in the family courts where mothers have had successive children removed from their care. Initial findings reported in December 2015 revealed that at least one in four women who have a child removed from their care by court order will return to the family court in relation

to a subsequent child. For women who were teenagers at the birth of their first child, this figure increases to one in three. In addition, the study has also found a dramatic increase in the number of newborns subject to care proceedings: 2,018 babies in 2013, up from 802 in 2008. A final report will be published later this year. For further details see: <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/vulnerable-birth-mothers-and-recurrent-care-proceedings>

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