

Inequalities in the Experience of Early Education

Briefing from LSE's Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE)

- Important new research from LSE exposes stark inequalities experienced in early education, which could have life-long ramifications for children experiencing them.
- Using data from the National Pupil Database in England, in particular relating to children who claim Free School Meals (FSM), CASE's Dr Tammy Campbell, Dr Ludovica Gambaro and Dr Kitty Stewart paint a detailed picture of **where the system is failing children from lower income families and from other key groups**, and suggest policy initiatives to help children gain a more equitable start in life.
- Key findings include:
 - Take-up of the full allocation of free early education is far lower amongst low income families than others.
 - Access to pre-school education is higher overall in areas where more places are in Sure Start centres, with less inequality experienced between different income groups.
 - There is a greater likelihood of disruption for some more disadvantaged children in the transition from nursery to reception, causing unnecessary upheaval at a critical time

Access to and Take-Up of Early Education Opportunities

- Autumn-born children are entitled to five free terms of early education. However, there are sharp differences in the take-up of the full duration of this entitlement by income group, by whether children have English as an Additional Language (EAL), and by ethnicity.
- **Families from households in persistent poverty are almost twice as likely not to access the full free allocation:** amongst children who go on to claim FSM in all three of their first three years of primary school, 29% do not access their place from the beginning, compared to only 15% who have FSM in none of the first three years.
- The data also shows that children from EAL households have a relatively high likelihood of non-attendance whatever their income status, while low income is more explicitly associated with non-attendance among English-only households. CASE's figures break down attendance by ethnic group and we can supply more information.
- The research further shows that take-up of pre-school education is higher overall in areas where more pre-school places are in Sure Start centres, with **less inequality of take-up between different income groups**.
- The data shows **there is a 17% reduction in non-take up in areas with more Sure Start provision for children who go on to claim FSM in every year of early primary school.** Local Sure Start provision is further associated with a 7% reduction in non-take up for children who never claim FSM.
- This may reflect better outreach and lower barriers to entry, such as registration fees, alongside flexibility to offer entry throughout the year. Also, families may simply be more aware of the Sure Start offer, having already used health services or toddler groups, which build communal trust. The findings also show that localised voluntary sector provision is associated with higher take up of the free entitlement.

- However, cuts to local authority budgets and changes to funding formulae have led to the closure of many Sure Start centres and challenges to the viability of some voluntary sector providers. Growth in early years provision has predominantly been in the private sector – which is generally less accessible to low-income families.

Recommendation

- CASE recommends that the Government affirms its support for Sure Start and voluntary sector early years provision, and allocates resources to protect places in both. **Given the benefits to access and equality, this data should urgently inform Spending Review considerations across DfE, MHCLG and the Treasury.**

Transition from Nursery to Primary School

- CASE's research exposes interesting data about children's' transition from early years provision to primary school, showing that the system creates a greater likelihood of disruption for some more disadvantaged groups, which could have lifelong effects. In England, this transition usually takes place at the age of four.
- Some groups (such as Black Caribbean children, and those with Special Educational Needs) are more likely than others to start nursery in one school then move to a different school for reception, severing friendship groups and making a key transition point more difficult. This can compound, rather than offset, other sources of inequality.
- 75% of Black Caribbean children who attend a school nursery stay on at that school for reception, compared to 83% of White British Children and 88% of Bangladeshi children. Given the disadvantage experienced throughout their educational careers, it is worrying that inequality and disruption can be seen to be engrained in their experiences so early on.
- **There is a much higher rate of movement for children attending school nurseries who have a Statement of Special Educational Needs – 26% compared to 18% of those with no SEND.** There is evidence that this is in part due to schools discouraging the admittance to reception of children with complex needs, requiring them to move to alternative institutions, a potentially significant upheaval at a critical time.
- Overall the research finds that children from low-income households are more likely than other children to enjoy direct transition from nursery to reception in the same school, because low-income children are more likely to attend school nurseries than other types of provision. However, low-income children are also more likely than higher-income children to attend no pre-school at all, before starting reception.
- Children who are younger in the year are also slightly less likely to attend school nursery. This makes them more likely to have to make a transition to a new environment when going into reception, while their peers will already have made connections at nursery.

Recommendation

- **More government-driven research is needed to determine why children from Black Caribbean households, and those with SEND, are less likely to make a transition from nursery to reception in the same school.** Local authorities should be empowered, encouraged and funded to investigate these issues locally. DfE and councils should also work together to understand why there are fewer summer-born children in in school nurseries, and take actions to change this – such as more active and earlier signposting.

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