

Helping Poor Kids: Effective Policies to Reduce Educational Inequalities

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A solid education gives children the foundation for a secure future. Study after study reveals that poor children lag behind their more advantaged peers at school; this has implications for their future welfare. Effective education policies can make a difference, but the exact formula for a good school is hard to capture. What happens in the home is also important and can be affected by public policies to reduce income inequalities.

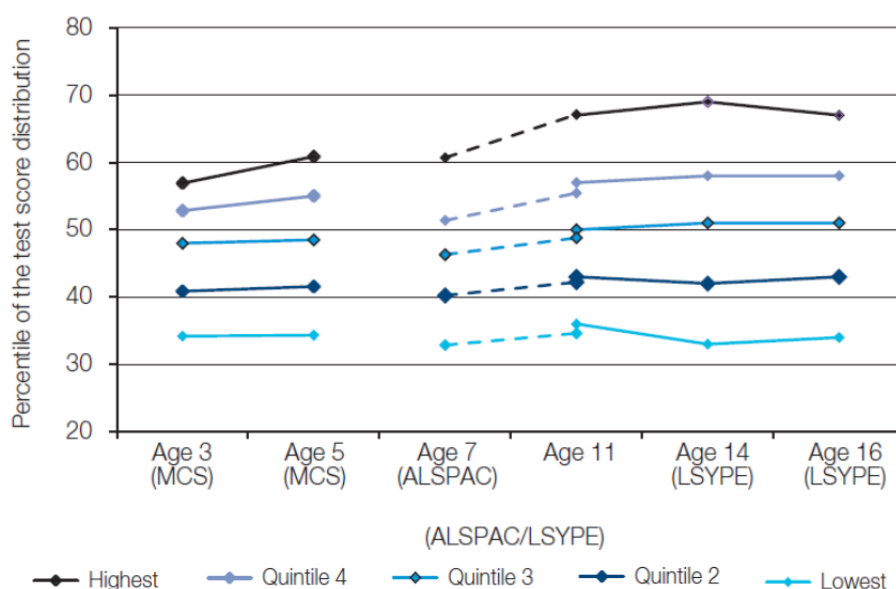
Inequalities in cognitive skills are evident even before children start school. Pre-schoolers from higher social backgrounds have wider vocabularies, a greater awareness of mathematical concepts and fewer behavioural difficulties. It is not surprising that poor children also do worse than others once they enter formal education. What is more, gaps in performance grow as children age, as illustrated by the figure for the United Kingdom.

Studies using data from the PISA international student achievement test suggest that the gap between low and high socio-economic groups at age 15 is equivalent to between 1 and 2.5 years of schooling. This gap varies considerably by country – for example being lower in Scandinavian countries whilst being higher in some of the countries of Eastern and Southern Europe.

Differences in literacy scores on the PIAAC adult skills test between people whose par-

ents were from high and low education groups (netting out various factors) are equivalent to about 2.5 years of schooling.

Educational outcomes by socio-economic position and age



We use United Kingdom data to divide the population of children into fifths, ranked according to a constructed measure of socio-economic position, which is based on their parents' income, social class, housing tenure and a self-reported measure of financial difficulties. We then chart the average cognitive test scores of these children from the ages of 3 through to 16. The dotted lines in the middle segment reflect that this sample is derived from ALSPAC data, which is a sample of children from the Avon area, rather than a national sample, and as such are not directly comparable to the other datasets used. Source: Goodman and Gregg (2010).

Although there are also big differences according to whether or not parents are migrants, most of this can be accounted for by the socio-economic background of migrants and whether they speak the language of the host country. Thus, often inequality between migrants and natives has to do with the characteristics of migrants and not migration status per se.

PRE-SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS

The use of early interventions to resolve educational inequalities has been widely advocated, and makes sense in light of the early inequalities observed. The largest effects have been found for poor children who experience intensive, high quality centre-based care and education. Evidence on the ability of universal pre-school in the European style to close socio-economic gaps is more mixed. It seems that money spent in the early years can be effective but quality matters and is best assured by a highly educated, well-paid early education workforce. The positive effects of early interventions tend to fade out, so must be followed up by further targeted investments in school.

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

Some countries target more resources towards disadvantaged areas, which is justified by the high relative cost of the policies that are more effective in reducing inequalities. Yet, research has shown that more resources do not always bring better results: the way they are used is just as important. Where positive effects of school funding are found, this tends to be higher for disadvantaged groups, but estimates vary a lot. Some nations such as the US, Sweden and UK allow independent providers to run state schools. This enables an experimental approach to finding out what works. Evidence from the US suggests this can be positive. For example, KIPP schools in the US adopt a 'no excuses model', with a strong focus on academic performance which involves longer days and terms, and more demands on teachers. If all disadvantaged children attended a KIPP school then the socio-economic gap in skills observed in PISA would be eliminated.

The disadvantage of such a policy is that they are expensive and demand a lot from teachers. Ideally we

would like to get inside the KIPP 'black box' to see if there are aspects of such whole school policies which can be replicated across the school system at less cost. In the UK, the Education Endowment Fund has been established to help spread evidence-based innovations. There is also cross-country support for the idea that school and teacher accountability can improve performance. However, there is more to learn.

Moving to later tracking to ensure that all students can get a broad education is a rare example of an inexpensive change which can help. Results suggest that later tracking is associated with better outcomes. This is particularly beneficial for poorer children who are more likely to otherwise be directed into vocational education.

OUTSIDE SCHOOL MATTERS TOO

Educational outcomes are shaped much more by the family than by the school. While this does not mean that schools cannot help to reduce these inequalities, it certainly leads us to wonder what can be done to help families. There is also compelling evidence that family income matters for children's outcomes; implying that income redistribution can help. Parental education also matters, especially for the low skilled, implying that investments made now will have ongoing benefits for subsequent generations. Direct interventions to support parents through parenting classes are also frequently advocated, but research evidence on them is limited and mixed. It may be difficult to get parents to sign up without stigma, especially those who need them most.

It would be unrealistic to think that any one particular policy can fix deeply entrenched inequalities – of which educational inequality is one manifestation. However, there are policies that appear to have greater effects on more disadvantaged students. The most effective of these tend to be fairly intensive and therefore quite expensive. We should also think about what can be done to help children within their homes. This might be a combination of targeted parenting interventions plus general policies to improve the environment experienced by families, such as redistribution.

For more details see: Jo Blanden, Sandra McNally, *Reducing Inequality in Education and Skills: Implications for Economic Growth*. EENEE Analytical Report 21, Feb. 2015, http://www.eenee.de/dms/EENEE/Analytical_Reports/EENEE_AR21.pdf.