
WAYS IN WHICH ECCD PROGRAMS CAN ADDRESS INEQUALITIES

The unhealthy conditions and stress associated with poverty are accompanied by inequalities in early development and learning. These inequalities help to maintain or magnify existing economic and social inequalities. In a vicious cycle, children from families with few resources often fall quickly and progressively behind their more advantaged peers in their mental development and their readiness for school and life, and that gap is never closed. Research carried out in Chile, for instance, shows poverty-related differences in psycho-motor development emerging clearly by 18 months of age and increasing from there onward, such that 40% of all children from poor families show delays in their development by age 5.¹

Social inequality

The Head Start program in the United States took its cue from research indicating that disadvantaged children could benefit from early interventions (Hunt 1961; Bloom 1964). Evidence from the evaluations of US programs strongly bears out that position (Lazar and Darlington 1982). In a review of 19 studies carried out in countries of the Majority World (Myers 1995) one finding was that children who are at a disadvantage can not only benefit, but often benefit even more than their more privileged peers from programs of early childhood development. This was true of children in India, where the disadvantage was linked to caste, and in Morocco and in several Latin American countries, where rural children profited more than urban children.

If the above findings are correct, then by failing to intervene in an opportune way to foster early childhood learning and development where conditions are difficult, governments tacitly endorse and strengthen existing inequalities related to caste, poverty, or ethnicity.

¹50% of the children were found to be delayed in their language development, 30% in their visual and motor development, and 17% in their gross motor development. These findings were reported in Seguel, Izquierdo, and Edwards, 1992.

Economic inequality

Ironically, one argument sometimes used against early education programs is that they are discriminatory—favoring the upper class. This is certainly true if no special effort is made to direct programs to the poor and/or if programs of early education, care and development are left only for those who can pay for them. But it is not true if programs are carefully directed toward those most in need.

A study of pre-primary programs in Thailand concluded that,

“...student achievement can be boosted by expanding access to pre-primary schools or by increasing the duration and instructional effectiveness of existing pre-primary programs. We expect that such changes, *if targeted to rural areas and areas with large poverty concentrations*, would also reduce inequalities in the distribution of student achievement.” (Raudenbush, Kidchanapanish, and Kang 1991)

Gender inequality

Another dimension of inequality is gender inequality. These inequalities begin to appear before children enter primary school. Evidence from India (Lal and Wati 1986) and from Guatemala (Klein 1979) suggest that early childhood programs can favor girls. This may occur at least in part because the expectations of parents regarding the education of their female children are raised as a result of their participation in a preschool program.

Strategies to address inequalities

In brief, if a goal of early childhood development programs is to help to even out social differences, then extra care must be taken to make sure that programs are directed specifically to disadvantaged groups. And care must also be taken to see that the quality of the programs provided is good. Some specific strategies include:

1. INVEST IN IMPROVING ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT. Here, equality is defined narrowly in terms of the possibility of access to some kind of program. The focus is on building centers and on increasing the numbers of children (or parents) enrolled in an early childhood development program. Closing the equity gap means closing the enrollment gap.

Unfortunately, little attention is given to program quality in this approach. When quality is addressed, it is defined in terms of inputs to the learning and development process and minimum standards are defined for the inputs. It is rarely defined in terms of the program's effects on children and families. In general, in this approach, the standards set for the inputs are not at the level of those of the middle class. Overcoming the equity gap means providing the same minimum package of inputs to all.

2. INVEST BY PROVIDING MORE TO THOSE WITH LESS SO AS TO IMPROVE RESULTS. This strategy has three main elements: defining the populations who do not perform well by some standard, determining and implementing the actions that are needed to overcome the deficit, and monitoring results to see if inequalities (defined by results rather than by opportunities) are

reduced. Here the idea is not only to provide a minimum package of inputs so we can point to equality of opportunity, but also to provide additional inputs where needed to overcome a deficit. These extra inputs might include such items as creative incentives to get good teachers to go to and stay for a period in rural areas or providing programs of special support for children who have severe learning disabilities.

This strategy represents a definite advance over one that centers on equality of opportunity. However, in most cases a strategy of positive discrimination is not monitored in terms of results. And, more importantly, when it is, the results that are sought are uniform results defined by the values and norms and culture of the middle (or dominant) class in a country. Closing the equity gap means bringing children up to a particular standard, indicated by performance on a scale of development or a test. This is not a bad goal to seek, but the obvious tendency is to homogenize and seek equity by reducing (or ignoring) cultural differences under a hidden assumption that the culture that sets the standards is better.

There is a growing tendency to focus investments on so-called disadvantaged populations (rural, urban marginal, indigenous) and provide them with what in the United States was termed a “head start”. And there is some evidence, cited earlier, that this does bring relative improvements in results.

3. INVEST BY PROVIDING MORE TO THOSE WITH LESS, BUT IN WAYS THAT RESPECT DIVERSITY. This third strategy builds upon the earlier two but adds respect for diversity to the mix. People choosing this strategy are not content with the idea of defining deficits by a common standard and filling in the holes. They seek out, as well, strengths and valued abilities of particular cultures and reinforce them. The strategy involves constructing programs of early childhood development in collaboration with the different communities to be served rather than imposing a standard program upon them. It involves defining results that are equitable, but not necessarily identical. (For instance, language ability might be measured in reference to a different language from the dominant language.)

This third strategy, which celebrates and seeks to preserve a measure of diversity, introduces complications. First, because it implies a diversity of programs rather than one standardized program it is more difficult to administer and to evaluate. Second, it means giving communities a greater say in programs, which, in turn means letting go of a certain degree of power exercised from the center. It probably means implementing a degree of decentralization. Third, it is entirely possible that such programs will have a less favorable cost-benefit ratio than more homogeneous programs of the type outlined in the first two strategies—if that ratio is calculated only in terms of greater economic productivity. But if we add in the other benefits, including equity and the preservation of cherished values, for instance, the investment may have a very high pay off indeed.

Pursuing equity and quality while respecting diversity also requires a shift in thinking about what it means to “go to scale” with a program. In most cases today, we think of scale as the extension of the same program, with the same model and content, to an ever-larger number of children. If we take diversity seriously, we must think of scale as extending coverage through a variety of programs which, when added together constitute scale.

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