



Early years program evaluations: The UK evidence base



NSW Department of
Community Services

Introduction

This Seminar Note provides an overview of a presentation on 10 July 2006 by Professor Ted Melhuish from the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues (Birkbeck, University of London) on the evaluation of two early years programs in England – Sure Start and Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE). Some of the key findings from this work in the UK will have relevance for local efforts in New South Wales.

Sure Start

Background to Sure Start

Sure Start is an early intervention program for children under four and their families in the UK. Sure Start is central to the UK government's policy for combating the adverse effects of poverty and disadvantage on young children and their families. The aim of Sure Start is to work with parents-to-be, parents and children to enhance family functioning and promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children, particularly those who are disadvantaged.

Sure Start local programs (SSLP) aim to improve existing services and create new services in deprived areas with average populations under 13,000. Services within SSLPs are universally available and unlike most early interventions, do not have a prescribed 'curriculum' or set of services. Instead, each SSLP has local autonomy regarding creating and improving evidence-based services as needed. Services provided within SSLPs include the provision of outreach or home visiting; family support; support for good quality play, learning, and childcare experiences; primary and community health care; advice about child and family health and development; and support for people with special needs.

National Evaluation of Sure Start

The Sure Start program recognised the need for rigorous evaluation and following a competitive commissioning process, the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) was set up. The evaluation is being conducted by a group led by Professor Ted Melhuish at the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues, which is part of Birkbeck, University of London. NESS aimed to determine whether existing services changed, whether delivered services improved, and whether children, families and communities showed benefits as a result of SSLPs. NESS addressed these questions through four core research components:

- implementation evaluation that considered how programs were operating and changing;
- impact evaluation that examined effects of SSLPs on children and families;
- local context analysis that considered communities as units of analysis and how they function and change over time; and
- cost-effectiveness analysis that examined economic return on investment of the SSLPs.

Findings from the initial impact evaluation

The initial impact evaluation of SSLPs has examined differences between children and families in 150 randomly selected communities with SSLPs and 50 comparison communities to have SSLPs at a later date. Using a quasi-experimental cross-sectional design, randomly selected mothers were interviewed in the SSLP areas (mothers of 12,575 children aged nine months and 3,927 children aged 36 months) and comparison areas (mothers of 1,509 children aged 9 months and 1,101 children aged 36 months). In addition, children aged 36 months were assessed for cognitive and linguistic functioning. The following key study findings were as follows:

- Mothers of children aged nine months living in SSLP areas reported less household chaos and mothers of children aged 36 months showed greater parental acceptance of their communities than those in comparison areas.
- SSLPs did not influence mothers' reports of service use or usefulness.

- Children of non-teenage mothers had fewer behavioural problems and greater social competences when living in SSLP areas, but the reverse was true for children of teenage mothers.
- Children of teenage mothers were adversely affected by living in SSLP areas with lower verbal ability and social competence and greater behavioural problems when compared to those in the comparison areas. Additionally, children of other socially deprived families (lone parents, workless households) living in SSLPs showed poorer verbal ability relative to the comparison sample.
- Health-led SSLPs were more effective than other SSLPs.

Overall, SSLPs appear to benefit less socially deprived parents and their children but seem to have an adverse effect on the most disadvantaged children. This finding may be attributable to socially deprived parents being less able to take advantage of SSLP services and may find the extra attention of service providers stressful and intrusive. However, because of the quasi-experimental nature of the study, the findings should be treated with caution, and that further follow-ups of the nine month old children should enhance understanding of these initial findings.

Key lessons from the National Evaluation of Sure Start

There are several key lessons that emerge from the evaluation:

1. Determined and sustained attention to facilitating access to services is needed, including provision of transport, flexible opening hours and provision of child care.
2. Trust is fundamental to engaging parents and families.
3. There were clear capacity problems for services mainly relating to not having enough trained staff.
4. Interagency collaboration was found to be essential for good service delivery.
5. Further opportunities are needed to enhance interagency collaboration, as services need permeable rather than fixed boundaries.
6. Data protection policies and problematic interagency relationships hinder consistent and comprehensive access to data.

Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)

Background to the evaluation of EPPE

EPPE is a large-scale, longitudinal study funded by the Department for Education and Skills in the UK. It began in 1996 with the aim of investigating which kinds of service provision are most effective in promoting young children's progress and development, and to explore whether pre-school experience continues to influence children after they start primary school. EPPE is the first longitudinal pre-school research in Europe to use an educational effectiveness design based on sampling children in a range of different pre-school settings.

EPPE follows a large sample of young children from pre-school entry (age three years plus) to age seven years. The study sample included over 3,000 children and 141 pre-school centres drawn from six types of providers in five regions in England. In addition, a sample of over 300 'home' children who had little or no pre-school experience was included as a comparison group. Children were assessed at entry to the study and again at entry to primary school.

The evaluation has examined the impact of amount and duration of pre-school experience on young children's cognitive attainments at entry to primary school. They sought to identify how children entering school with little or no pre-school experience differed from their peers who had attended centres in the main EPPE pre-school sample.

Key findings from the evaluation

When compared to the EPPE sample, the 'home' comparison sample had significant poorer pre-reading, early number concepts and language attainment at entry to primary school. While there were significant differences in the socio-demographic characteristics of the two samples, with the comparison sample more likely to be from ethnic minority groups, from larger families and to have mothers with no formal qualifications, these were controlled statistically in the analysis.

In relation to duration of time in pre-school, overall children who had spent more time in pre-school had significantly higher cognitive attainments than the home sample for pre-reading, early number and language. The differences were largest for those who had spent three years plus at pre-school compared with none, controlling for other factors.

The study also found that background factors (for example, mothers' education, family socioeconomic status) are powerfully associated with variations in young children's attainment when children start

primary school, especially for language attainment. So despite the finding that a pre-school experience can help reduce inequality in cognitive development associated with more disadvantaged backgrounds, there is also a need for more intensive work on language enrichment for young children who show poor language attainment when they start school.

The evaluation notes that it was difficult to conclude with certainty, that the poorer outcome of the 'home' comparison group was due to lack of pre-school experience, due to their different characteristics. However, by controlling statistically for these factors, it would appear that vulnerable children without pre-school experience are likely to be at a particular disadvantage when they start primary school.

Key lessons from the evaluation of EPPE

- Pre-school matters but what parents do matters too – and effective pre-school centres support learning in the home.
- The quality of the learning environment of the home (where parents are actively engaged in activities with children) promoted intellectual and social development in all children.
- Although parent's social class and levels of education were related to child outcomes, the quality of the home learning environment was more important – what parents do is more important than who they are.
- Pre-school children had better cognitive and social-behavioural outcomes than those who stayed at home.
- High quality childcare helps all children and is related to staff qualifications.
- The beneficial effects of pre-school persist through to primary school.
- Pre-school can reduce the effects of disadvantage – for disadvantaged groups, high quality childcare boosts development and the relative influence of social class and poverty is reduced at entry to school as a result of pre-school experience.
- Age matters – extensive group care in the first year particularly may affect anti-social behaviour, while after two years of age, centre based provision has benefits for all.

Conclusion

There are two key challenges that emerge from the evaluations of Sure Start and the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education program.

In terms of Sure Start, there has to be a balance between community control in determining what services might be provided in targeted communities and a central specification of what services are to be provided. A possible solution here is for communities to select from a 'menu' of services with demonstrated effectiveness.

In terms of EPPE, high quality care, education and play is the key to enhancing children's development. To ensure quality, a qualified workforce at a degree level is essential, underpinned by an effective regulation and inspection regime.

Further information

- Further information about the National Evaluation of Sure Start can be found at <http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/>
- Further information about the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education program can be found at <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/projects/eppe>

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