



Policy and research on optimal quantity of early childhood education and care provision

Purpose

At the Brighter Futures Working Group meeting in February, the Operations Manager Coffs Harbour, Tony White, raised a concern that in Brighter Futures, because of budgetary constraints, two days has become the standard amount of early childhood education and care (ECEC) rather than the minimum. It was requested that the Principal Policy Officer review research on the optimal amount of time for disadvantaged children to be in ECEC.

In addition to reviewing the research in this area, the briefing provides an overview of relevant Commonwealth Government policies relating to 'universal access' to preschool education of all four year olds.

Discussion

Policy Context

As part of the Council of Australian Government (COAG) initiatives for the National Early Childhood Development Strategy, the Commonwealth Government is introducing a new policy benchmark of providing universal access to 15 hours per week for 40 weeks per year of preschool education of all four year olds. It is important to note that the key word in the commitment is universal 'access'. There is nothing in the policy that commits to preschool provision being free. A number of states already provide free preschool through their education systems. However NSW does not.

The Government's initiative has been developed in response to a decade of campaigning to improve access to ECEC for all children and to create a more coordinated policy approach towards children in their early years of life. Key reports such as the Australian Education Union's report in 2000¹ and its follow-up reports highlighted that many children are missing out on preschool education and that there is no coherent approach amongst state and territories to preschool provision.

In NSW, in campaigning for universal access including affordable preschool services, children's services advocacy groups generally argued for two full days (or 6 X 2 = 12 hours) of free preschool per week as a bottom-line target.

This was based on general enrolment patterns evident in many preschool services. It also correlated with preschool services that operated on a half-day sessional basis or 3 hours X 5 days per week (equivalent to 15 hours). This was what most families seemed to want for their children. It is also arguable that one day is of little benefit to children as they spend most of the day settling into a new routine and it is difficult to build relationships based on one day.

It is unclear why the Federal government settled on '15 hours' of preschool in its universal access policy. It is not directly linked to any particular piece of research but would seem to have

evolved out of the sessional approach to preschool provision. For many services 15 hours per week X 41 weeks is easy to deliver; for example in long day care most children will attend a minimum of eight hours per day, and most young children attend on a part-time basis even in long day care services. However, it does pose challenges for preschools that operate on 'school hours'.

The matter of how much ECEC is enough and how much is too much is a contentious political issue which at times has produced quite polarised positions. Nevertheless, in the policy documents produced by the Federal Government through the National Early Childhood Development Strategy there has been strong recognition of the benefits of quality ECEC for disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

Research on time spent in early education and care

The following section provides an overview of research relating to intensity of time spent in ECEC:

1. Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Blatchford, I S., Taggart, B. and Elliot, K., 2003, *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from the Pre-school Period*, Institute of Education, University of London.

This study examined the impacts of quantity of child care in terms of both duration and full or part time attendance.

The duration of pre-school showed a significant positive link with young children's cognitive progress during pre-school for all five cognitive measures. A longer period of months of preschool experience was associated with greater gains, even when other significant factors were controlled.

By contrast, the number of sessions for which a child was registered per week was not found to relate to amount of cognitive gain during pre-school, when the impact of other factors was controlled. There was no evidence that full-time provision (10 sessions per week) resulted in better outcomes than part-time provision (i.e. 5 sessions).

The authors suggest that taken together, the findings suggest that an extended period of pre-school experience on a part time basis is likely to be more advantageous than a shorter time period of full-time provision. However, it should be noted that the centres in the study varied considerably in terms of quality.

2. Loeb, S., Bridges, M., Bassok, D., Fuller, B., Ruberger, R., *How Much is too much?*, 2007, 'The influence of preschool centers on children's social and cognitive development, *Economics of Education Review*, 26, 52-56

The authors note that there has been little empirical work on the effects of either length of exposure to centre programs or intensity of exposure.

In this study the researchers examined the effects of different child care arrangements on children's cognitive and social proficiencies at the start of school. The study used data from the US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study to compare outcomes for children who did not attend centre based care; those who attended care for 15 to 30 hours per week (moderate intensity group); and those who attended care for at least 30 hours per week (high intensity group). This categorisation was based on the typical half-day and full-day programs in the US.

A notable finding of the study was that intensity effects depended on family income.

The study found that overall, children who attended a centre at least 15 hours a week, substantially increased the contribution of centre programs to cognitive growth of children. Attending more than 30 hours a week was also associated with increased positive cognitive skills. Consistent with previous research they found longer hours were associated with negative behavioural outcomes.

However, the estimates for the full group obscured differences across income groups. For the low-income group, only children who attended a centre for more than 30 hours experienced significant gains in pre-reading skills. This group experienced no negative social behavioural effects from additional hours in a centre.

At the other extreme, children from higher income families did not show any significant gains from attending centres for more than 30 hours per week and, in contrast to the low-income children, displayed increasingly negative behaviour the longer they attended a centre program each week.

The evaluators conclude that while half day programs may be beneficial for children from higher-income families, full day programs better serve children from lower-income families, allowing them to gain pre-reading and maths skills without detriment to social behaviour.

A limitation of this study is that the children were attending a wide range of centre based programs and the quality of the programs is unknown.

3. Russell, M, 2009, Centre-based Childcare: Can the Benefits Outweigh the Costs

The author refers to literature which favours the view that a great quantity of time spent in child care is detrimental to a child's development. According to this literature, long hours in care, especially if started early in life and continued over several years, could be detrimental to a mother's sensitivity to her child and therefore weaken attachment security.

However, the author argues that poor levels of development that are often reported in studies on centre care often coincide with low standards of quality.

In contrast, the Early Head Start Program in the U.S. examined children whose regular amount of time in care was high – at least 30 hours per week, but the standards of care were also high. These children displayed proficient socio-emotional competence, improved cognitive and language abilities, and low levels of aggressive behaviour at 24 and 36 months.

Conclusion

In summary, there has been limited research on the effects of time spent in ECEC, and the findings are mixed. Further, research in this area has not focused specifically on the impacts of intensity when children are enrolled in centres where standards of care are high.

In conclusion, there is no evidence to suggest a particular number of hours of ECEC is optimal for all children. This suggests that there is no reason why an assumption in Brighter Futures programs of two days per week would be appropriate for every child. Therefore it would seem appropriate that every family is assessed in relation to their individual circumstances.

Further information

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References

¹ Australian Education Union, 2000, A Submission by the Australian Education Union to the OECD Thematic Review of Early Education and Care, www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/eceoecd.pdf