

Education Selection Committee Life Chances Inquiry

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents nearly 19,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
2. It is difficult to over-estimate the importance of Early Years education in determining life chances and promoting social justice. Extensive research over many years highlights the crucial role played by quality early education in children's cognitive, social and behavioural development. This has the biggest impact on disadvantaged children, who are less likely to receive this input at home.
3. The 2012 Nutbrown Review, 'Foundations for Quality'¹ effectively summarises the findings of research in this area as follows:
 - Quality Early Years provision has a lasting positive impact on child outcomes.
 - High quality Early Years provision narrows the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children.
 - Perception of quality is a key factor for parents when choosing a childcare provider.
 - The qualification level of staff in the setting improves quality.
 - The introduction of a graduate leader improves the quality of provision in settings.
 - Having a qualified teacher in an Early Years setting has the greatest impact on quality.
4. Communication skills and language development are fundamental to the benefits of quality early education. A recent report by Oxford University Press, 'Why Closing the Word Gap Matters',² highlighted the substantial and pernicious gulf between the vocabulary employed by children from different socio-economic backgrounds. The key findings of this report include:
 - 49% of Year 1 pupils have a limited vocabulary to the extent that it affects their learning.
 - This issue persists into secondary school, with 43% of Year 7 pupils being similarly affected.
 - Teachers believe the problem is getting worse. 69% of the primary school teachers and 60% of the secondary school teachers who took part in the

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175463/Nutbrown-Review.pdf

² <http://fdslive.oup.com/www.oup.com/oxed/Oxford-Language-Report.PDF?region=uk>

survey said that they think the number of pupils with limited vocabulary is either increasing or significantly increasing in their schools compared to a few years ago.

5. Numerous studies have found a clear correlation between the rate at which children develop language and the amount of input that they receive from parents and primary carers. These interactions give children a stronger grasp of language by the time they start school, an advantage which stays with them throughout their education. If it is not dealt with in the Early Years, the word gap is shown to widen as the child gets older. Children who start school with low levels of vocabulary are disproportionately from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
6. Low levels of literacy affect not just children's educational attainment, but also their wider life chances. Research from the Early Intervention Foundation, for example in 'Language as a Child Well Being indicator'³, shows that children with language difficulties at age five were four times more likely to have reading difficulties in adulthood, three times as likely to have mental health problems, and twice as likely to be unemployed when they reached adulthood.
7. Schools clearly have a crucial role to play in developing children's communication and language skills, and in closing the gap between the most and least disadvantaged. However, the extent to which the 'word gap' is already established by the age of five highlights the importance of support for parents, of high quality Early Years education and of integrated education and social care services.
8. We are concerned that some recent government policies and priorities actively work against the provision of high quality, integrated Early Years services, serving to increase rather than decrease the advantage gap.
9. For example, the current 'entitlement model' for 30 hours of free childcare for working families is socially divisive. The model is designed to encourage parents into work, but the effect of this approach is that children whose parents who can least afford to top up this provision are not able to access full time provision. This leads to schools and nurseries having to send children whose parents aren't eligible for the 30 funded hours, home halfway through the day. These children, from families not in work, are precisely those most likely to be in need of high quality early education. There should be 30hrs entitlement for all children, if life chances are to be equitable.
10. We have also identified that in some parts of the country there are also some changes occurring in the nature of the provision. There are high quality nursery schools with well-structured learning programmes which often, but not always, are attached to primary schools that are now closing down or changing the nature of their provision.
11. We also detect that there is a wide range of approaches in private nurseries, some of which are very good but others do not have a focus on learning and teaching and are more of a childcare facility than a nursery school.
12. Consideration should also be given to the way in which the pupil premium is used to support young children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Early Years pupil premium is currently set at 53 pence per hour, which equates to £302.10 per annum. The pupil premium for primary-aged children, in comparison, is £1320. Bringing the Early Years premium up to the same level as the primary premium would enable

³ http://www.eif.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/language-child-wellbeing-indicator_Sep2017.pdf

nurseries and Early Years settings to more effectively tackle the effects of socio-economic disadvantage at the point when intervention can make the most difference.

13. In addition, ASCL members report that they are finding it increasingly difficult to access early intervention services, particularly for nursery children. The decline in services such as children's centres and Surestart has exacerbated this issue. Children are presenting with increasingly complex social, emotional and behavioural issues, and there is little, if any, support for families before their children reach statutory school age.
14. Finally, consideration must be given to ensuring the Early Years workforce is of the highest quality. As the Nutbrown Review made clear, knowledgeable and capable practitioners, supported by strong leadership, are key to effective Early Years provision. However, Nutbrown's recommendation that there should be a graduate-led Early Years' workforce in every setting by 2015 is still far from reality. Again, it is children from disadvantaged families who are disproportionately affected by the variable quality of Early Years' provision.

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