

The Economics of Inequality: The Value of Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

One of the largest burdens to a national economy is an underdeveloped work force. Often, policies that are fair are not economically efficient. However, a policy that invests in the lives of young disadvantaged children is an exception. This article discusses the economic value of equalizing disadvantaged children's possibilities for success by providing them and their families with resources.

What is needed for improved skill formation?

Lower-quality early childhood experiences produce lower health, achievement, and life success. A program that combines cognitive and social skills is more effective than a program that develops cognitive skills alone. Quality early childhood education can compensate for negative parental and environmental factors. It also reduces the achievement gap, the need for costly special services, and reduces the overall cost to society.

Winning or Losing the Lottery of Birth

We need to provide resources to disadvantaged families so we can help them help their children. On average, single-parent homes invest less in their children than nuclear-family homes, which produces large gaps in cognitive stimulation and emotional support. These gaps persist into adulthood. In regards to income, quality parenting is more important than income. An economically disadvantaged child who is exposed to good parenting is more likely to succeed than an economically advantaged child exposed to poor parenting.

Contemporary society does not make high-quality parenting easy to execute. Often, both parents must work in order to make ends meet, which leaves less time for parents to invest in their children. Access to quality early education can help counteract the negative effects of less-than-ideal parenting situations.

Cognition and Character Propel Success

Personality traits are just as reliable a predictor as cognitive skills in the areas of achievement, future income, and participation in crime. Furthermore, cognition and character influence each other to determine future success. Unfortunately, our current education focuses almost solely on the development of cognitive skills.

Targeting Disadvantaged Children Promotes Economic Efficiency

Gaps in the elements that determine adult success are seen very early in life. After second grade, factors such as class size and teacher salary do little to close this gap.

Furthermore, family variables play a bigger part in student test scores than school variables. Providing parental support in addition to quality early childhood education can help close this gap and promote short and long term achievement. This builds a more productive and economically efficient society.

Enriching Early Family Environments Can Compensate for Disadvantage

Preschool programs that target character as well as cognitive development, such as the Perry Preschool Program, have produced students with higher achievement test scores. This is because knowledge acquisition is influenced by personality traits. It is wise to facilitate improvements in both early childhood education and parenting skills. The Nurse-Family Partnership is one such program that supports parenting skills to increase the child's adult success.

Moving Toward Better Education and Economic Outcomes

The first step towards achieving educational equity is to recognize that everything is dynamic and nothing is equal. Parental education should be implemented at or before birth to correct inequality. Quality early childhood education should be followed by quality elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education so that gains made in cognition and character can be sustained.

Conclusion

Economically, it is wiser to invest in early support than pay for the far more expensive later remediation services. Children who have had quality early experiences grow up to be more productive members of society, which in turn positively influences the economy. These experiences should be provided in the form of both quality education and family environment.

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