More than you know: how early childhood education and care offers value for money in times of austerity

Verity Campbell-Barr
University of Plymouth, Plymouth, UK

During the last three decades the interest in early childhood education and care (ECEC) has expanded, as it is increasingly recognised as essential for developing both social and economic outcomes for children, their families and wider society. At a global level a number of supra-national organisations, including the World Bank, the OECD and the European Union, have promoted ECEC as a major site for social investment. Whilst I do not dispute that ECEC does offer value, the concern is how the concept of value is derived. The duality of the objectives to strengthen ECEC provision around both social and economic outcomes firstly raises question as to what is being valued - the social well-being of children and their education, supporting parental employment or wider social objectives around equality of access to the benefits of ECEC for both children and their families? Secondly, there are serious questions concerning value for who? The evidence that ECEC offers value for money is largely shaped by the perspective that "early childhood settings provide an important basis for future acquisition of human capital" (OECD, 1998: 12). Human capital encapsulates the knowledge, skills, competences and attributes that will contribute to individual and societal well-being and economic success (Keely, 2007: 3). However, understandings of human capital have become increasingly narrow, tending to focus primarily on cognitive development (Heckman, 2000). Further, the focus on human capital perspectives hides any notion of considering appropriate pedagogical approaches for ECEC, let alone whether differing pedagogies result in different outcomes for children. Here I review the literature on early years education offering value for money, questioning the notion of value for who and what this means for developing appropriate ways of working with children. I use England as an example of where an over emphasis of the cognitive outcomes reflected in human capital perspectives results in early years education being synonymous with schoolification, with evidence that this not only creates a narrow concept of value for money, but might not be the best for achieving a holistic set of outcomes for children.

References:


Heckman, J.J. 2000. Invest in the very young. Chicago, IL: Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Studies.