

Closing the Gap in Access to Free “Universal” Early Education: What Types of Provision Can Help Low-Income Families Participate?

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For over a decade, all three-year-olds in England have formally been entitled to a free part-time early education place. However, one in five families do not access their free place from the beginning of their eligibility – and the proportion rises to almost one in three among those with persistently low incomes.

What factors are associated with this inequality in access? While differences in children’s ethnicity and home language do not seem to explain gaps by income-level, the type of provision available locally seems to play a part. In areas where most funded places are taken up in the private sector, attendance among poor families is lowest. In areas with early education predominantly in the state-maintained sector, all children seem

to attend for less time – but there is more equitability, and the gap between low and higher-income families is small. And in those relatively few areas with Sure Start provision, take-up is high overall, and the income gap reduced.

This highlights the need for appropriate early education to be available for families from all income-levels and circumstances. Simply providing a national entitlement to free hours appears to be insufficient if local provision is not suitable. As funding for early education and childcare increases, this consideration is vital so that spending can mitigate, rather than add to, inequalities in children’s early experiences.