

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Although Britain is one of the richest countries in the world, large numbers of very young children still fall behind and stay behind at school. This report has been published by Save the Children, who state their aim to “do our part in the future to make sure that every young child has a fair chance in life.” This report looks at how the achievement gap between very young children from low income families and their peers impacts on GCSEs and, subsequently on life and career opportunities. It examines the effect of the 2008 recession and the cost of the achievement gap. The wording below is drawn largely from the executive summary of the report.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Too many children fail before they have even started in life. This is in large part because of an enduring ‘achievement gap’: the gap in outcomes between disadvantaged children (in this country measured by uptake of free school meals) and their better-off peers.

Analysis for this report shows that, by the time they are seven, nearly 80% of the difference in GCSE results between rich and poor children has already been determined. In other words, half way through primary school, many children’s educational and often their life chances have been largely decided on grounds that are unfair.

Despite some political focus on the achievement gap, high numbers of children continue to fall behind by age seven and the impact of the 2008 economic crisis mean that tackling educational unfairness demands bolder action.

Literacy and numeracy are critically important. Save the Children found that, for those children who fall behind at seven:

- Fewer than one in six children from low-income families who have fallen behind by the age of seven will go on to achieve five good GCSEs, including English and maths.
- Better-off children who are behind are more likely to go on to achieve well – but even they only have a one in four chance of getting five good GCSEs, including English and maths.
- If a child from a poor family is already behind with their reading at the age of seven, they have just over a one in five chance of going on to achieve a C in English at GCSE.

This unfairness seems to some extent unnecessary and preventable, as some local areas do better than others. In some local authorities, close to 80% of the poorest children are achieving the expected level of achievement in both English and maths by the time they finish primary school, while in others, fewer than 60% are achieving at this level.

If all primary schools were performing as well as those in the top ten local authorities, around 7,000 more children, or around 50,000 by 2020, would have attained good levels of literacy by the end of primary school.

THE OVERALL COST TO SOCIETY

Beyond the individual human cost of the poorest children falling behind so early in their lives, modelling carried out for this report shows the enduring cost to the nation’s economy in wasted talent. If the UK had, in recent decades, taken action to close the achievement gap at 11, this would have led to a more skilled workforce and higher economic growth:

- GDP in 2013 would have been around £20 billion or 1% higher
- GDP in 2020 would be around £30 billion or 1.8% higher.
- GDP in 2030 would be around £60 billion or 3.1% higher.

Other countries, including Finland, Canada and South Korea, do better at ensuring talent flourishes in children, whatever circumstances they are born into.

THE IMPACT OF THE RECESSION

The new intake of children in primary schools in September 2013 were born during the 2008 global financial crisis and communities are feeling the effects of austerity.

Save the Children commissioned a poll of 2,000 parents of young children under the age of 11 to investigate the impact of tough economic times on family learning. Although parents continue to value their children's education they consider that it will be harder for them to achieve their hopes and ambitions. The current financial situation also makes it harder for them to support their child's education, either because pressure of work means that they have less energy to devote to their children, or because they do not have the means to pay for extra activities.

STARTING EARLY AT HOME AND IN SCHOOL

In the light of what it has found, Save the Children is calling for all political parties to sign up to a 2020 ambition, which would ensure that all children, regardless of background, can:

- start primary school ready to learn;
- catch up quickly if they start school already behind, so that no child is left behind at age seven; and
- leave primary school having had a good, fulfilling education, including being confident readers.

They also call on all political parties to develop proposals for their 2015 manifestos that would make progress towards these goals, focusing particularly on the following critical areas:

- protecting family incomes from the squeeze on living standards, so parents can provide the support their children need;
- continuing to invest in and improve preschool services and parenting support; and
- starting early, ensuring no child falls behind in our primary schools.

The government should make progress towards these goals, focusing particularly on the following critical areas:

- publish an annual report on progress in creating fair chances for all young children;
- as an immediate priority, focus additions to the Pupil Premium on five- to seven-year-olds – a new 'fair chances premium' at the age that matters most; and
- in the long term, front-load spending in primary school – in particular, the early years of primary school. Building on the successful introduction of the Pupil Premium, aiming to boost the Pupil Premium to £3,000–£4,000 in primary school would be one option.

SAVE THE CHILDREN'S COMMITMENT

- As children start primary school each year, Save the Children will be monitoring their progress – with a particular focus on the achievement of a fair start for all by age seven.
- In 2013, Save the Children is launching Born to Read – a programme that helps primary school-age children from deprived areas improve their reading skills.
- In the future, Save the Children are committed to developing further programmes in the UK that will support the learning and development of pre-school and primary school-age children.
- Save the Children will also be focusing in the coming years on what happens before children start school and how well parents are supported with these two issues.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/too-young-fail>