



**Wales Institute of Social & Economic
Research, Data & Methods**

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Economaid, Data a Dulliau Cymru

**WISERD & Welsh Government
Evidence Symposium:
The Best Start in Life:
What do we know about the impact of
early interventions on children's life
chances?**

Report on Symposium

February 2013



Welcome, Introduction and Setting the Scene

The importance of the early years is well understood within the Welsh Government. Since 2003 work has been underway to develop effective interventions in this area, such as the Flying Start programme. However, the question of what works best and is most effective remains important. Events such as this that bring colleagues from the policy, academic and third sectors together, are crucial to developing a greater understanding of such issues.

Lots of work is currently going on within the Welsh Government to increase coherence on poverty. A Tackling Poverty Action Plan has been developed. The early years are important in this context.

What is key is to establish whether current initiatives are delivering and whether they have been evaluated effectively. In the current economic climate there are tough choices to be made. Events such as this shed light on international interventions, this is important. However, at the same time, it is important to acknowledge that when developing interventions, the Welsh Government cannot look solely at what works internationally and simply recreate it for Wales. An in-depth understanding of contextual issues is vital to informing the development and implementation of interventions.

The Best Start in Life: What do we know about the impact of early interventions on children's life chances?

The briefing paper links into other evidence reviews in this area. This presentation will cover three key themes:

- The need for intervention
- Where to intervene
- How to intervene

Need for intervention

According to Feinstein (Feinstein, L. 2003, *Economica*) by the age of 7, bright children from poorer families tend to fall back in terms of attainment relative to more advantaged peers who had not performed well by the time they were 2-3. This analysis has dominated most policy debates the need for early intervention. However, analysis has been proven to be problematic and is not as straightforward as it may appear (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2011, Institute of Education, University of London).

Using data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) CT demonstrated that depending on the level of aggregation the relationship between measures of poverty and child development can be more or less evident – usually the greater level of aggregation the clearer the relationship appears.

However, at the level of the individual child this relationship is not as clear as it might appear, and illustrates the challenge of early interventions. Crucially, it matters at what scale or 'unit' the intervention is designed to impact at, and hence how it should be evaluated. Hence, the presentation went on to briefly consider issues relating to where to intervene.

Where do you intervene?

Many interventions are targeted at the home. However, data from the MCS actually might suggest that the home learning environment when children are aged 3 is better in Wales than in England, and for both rich and poor children. Similar patterns exist for some measures of child wellbeing. This might question the need to target families and the home learning environment. But equally it might suggest that the existence of a good home learning environment in Wales is not generating the same benefits to child development as it is in England.

Other interventions target preschool environment and settings. However, again using the MCS we see that on average children in Wales have similar or better levels of cognitive development as children in England, after controlling for key socio-economic differences. And again we see this when comparing rich children in Wales and poor children in Wales with equivalent children in England. Where cognitive development does exist by age 7 (e.g. literacy skills) it is after the age of three that the disparity with England occurs.

It is also well established that key socio-economic factors such as ethnicity and social class are important determinants of child development within Wales. Other factors include: child weight at birth; age of mother at birth; season of the year the child was born; and differences in home learning environment. However, despite considering all these kinds of factors we can still only account for 17% of the variation in children's cognitive development at age 7 by these known characteristics. The remaining 83% of individual variation remains unaccounted for, even within fairly detailed statistical modelling. Not only do we perhaps still know very little about what determines outcomes at age 7, it also suggests that any intervention (however good it is) is likely to only ever produce small effects. This brought the presentation on to how to intervene.

How to intervene

It would seem to be important what causal model we are using to help account for differences in child outcomes. Different interventions are often based on different conceptual/causal models of the 'problem' they are trying to address. It is useful, perhaps to distinguish between interventions that are designed to have a direct or indirect impact on child outcomes – the latter being aimed at factors that themselves lead on to differences in child outcomes.

Second, in terms of what we know about existing interventions, for many their evidence base is fairly weak. Even where evidence exists there is still a need to question the robustness and validity of this. Crucially there is often little or no information about the context in which interventions are undertaken, which is important when deciding whether to apply the intervention in a new context (e.g. Wales). Related to this is the transportability of the intervention, how do you take an intervention from one area and apply it somewhere else? The transportability of the design of the intervention is often just as important as the intervention itself, as it is the underpinning principles and design of the intervention that needs to be considered when applying an intervention in to a new context/setting.

To summarise, in terms of the need for interventions, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of factors that influence early years' outcomes. The intervention needs to be carefully designed, with a clear set of aims for what it is attempting to change.

In terms of where to intervene, interventions must be matched to where the desired outcomes and benefits are intended to occur. The decision must be made as to whether to pitch it at individual; family; school; or regional level. Interventions must operate at the scale at which change is desired.

In terms of how to intervene, it is recommended that care is taken around policy borrowing. In general, interventions should be considered in terms of their 'design' rather than as a 'product'.

The policy briefing noted four key areas often used by policy-makers in early interventions. These can be summarised as:

- Paternity leave
- Support to parents during pregnancy and early years
- Early childcare and education

- Programmes that combine parent support and early childcare/education

There is strong evidence for early intervention in general, but evidence for particular interventions is less strong. There is even less evidence about how interventions work and about the conditions in which they are most effective.

Discussion

It was agreed that in terms of home learning environment, it's not just about getting parents to read to children but it depends on what is read and how. This is a potential area for policy to influence.

It was noted that the regional difference between England and Wales may largely be due to differences between Wales and London; the apparent 'success' of England in early years development seems to be driven by something happening in London schools. The discussion raised the possible impact of ethnic minority children in this. But equally, education in London has been host to a raft of interventions, including high levels of performance management. However, Chris noted that child wellbeing in London appeared to be lower, on average, than elsewhere.

Response from a policy perspective

When considering this from a policy perspective, it is important to be clear whether it relates to early intervention or early years. Policy intervention aren't always undertaken within the early years, interventions can be later and still have massive impact on the child. There is also a need to be clear on what is meant by the early years, is it 0-3 years, 0-7 years? This varies UK wide.

In addition, what is meant by the best start in life? There is a need to be clear on the outcomes that are desired by parents for children in the early years that will give them the best start in life. For some this will be the parents getting jobs and ensuring that the child is attending school every day; for others it will be the child performing well academically.

In terms of policy development, there is perhaps an acknowledgement that sometimes the Welsh Government needs to better understand the whole system and think of it in design terms. Sometimes interventions don't have the intended impact or as much impact as expected. This is sometimes because there is a lack of understanding of the delivery system. Flying Start, for instance, has a complex delivery system. Considering policy interventions in the same way as product development, the Welsh Government are designers, they get involved to a limited extent in some manufacturing but rely on partners to deliver interventions.

Attention also needs to be given to national programmes which can also involve very different local approaches. In designing interventions, it is important to take account of differences that can apply to national programmes when implemented at local level.

There are also lots of local interpretations about how to deliver programmes. For instance, in terms of schools, is it the school that makes the difference or is it the people within the school? It is important to look at what makes a good school and put that into the less effective schools. How do you transfer what's right?

In terms of evaluation of interventions, it is important to ensure that the methodology used is appropriate. For example, elements of the parenting programmes within the Flying Start programme were evaluated through a randomised control trial, but these came back inconclusive. This brought into questions and stimulated debate about whether RCTs are the most effective way of evidencing impact of social policy interventions.

Transportability or transferability are also key. Quite often policy makers are pressurised to consider implementing interventions which have been seen to be successful elsewhere. What's to stop the Welsh Government designing its own home grown intervention in Wales that takes account of the evidence, rather than relying on other countries to tell us what to do?

There are also questions about how we utilise the existing infrastructure. Policy often tries to tackle problems by introducing a new intervention without thinking about how existing resources could be used.

Another issue is when to stop interventions. The Flying Start programme is up to age 3. What happens to children after that and how do we know it was those programmes that made the difference rather than programmes that come after them? It is important to know what makes the difference. There is also a danger of programme overload, with the government throwing loads of programmes at families and children in Wales. The approach needs rationalising.

Performance data is something else that needs to be improved. Performance is measured in schools but the data is not used intelligently to look at where children have come from and to look at social interventions and trends per community to see if it's community interventions that make the difference or it's social nuances within the community. In addition, not enough real term data is used.

Early Education and Care Project, Welsh Government

There is currently lots of discussion on early years within the Welsh Government and across departments. The previous presentation raised a number of key current questions. What is key is that we don't have a lot of the data; we can't track a child from birth to the end of the foundation phase and monitor the effects of interventions.

The Welsh Government have recently tendered for the early years development and assessment framework. This will look at children from birth to the end of foundation phase, taking into account needs of school teachers in terms of what is tracked and assessed. The tender will consider what a single assessment framework would look like, pinpointing when we assess and what the purpose and outcomes would be. The intention is to have a development framework from birth to end of foundation phase with assessment points and measures. Developmental work will be undertaken this year, followed by piloting and development of assessment tools next year, with the roll out of the framework towards the end of next year. The framework will inform thinking on what comes next in terms of interventions.

Response from a voluntary sector perspective

As noted by Jeremy Beecham, the voluntary sector in Wales has an important role in enhancing innovation, expertise and delivery capacity. There are currently 33,000 third sector organisations in Wales, comprising 978,000 volunteers and 51,000 paid staff. Voluntary sector organisations with a focus on early years include: Children in Wales; Barnados; Action for Children; and the NSPCC.

Save the Children aims to have a positive impact on as many children in the UK as possible. The organisation focuses in particular on poverty and giving children the best possible start in life. By 2015, Save the Children aims to transform the lives of one million children living in poverty in the UK, with 150,000 targeted through direct work. This transformation will take place through policy, advocacy and charity work. There are two key themes: supporting the poorest children in the early years to ensure they are ready to start school; and supporting them through primary school. The programme is focused on children aged 0-12 years.

It is difficult to encourage people to talk about their lives in poverty. Statistics matter but there is also the bigger picture, and it is important to consider feelings and emotions.

There are 5 key save the children programmes: FAST; ESLP; Beanstalk; a nutrition programme (in development); Children's Zones (in development).

- The FAST programme is targeted at families and links parents and schools
- The ESLP programme, recognises that material deprivation impacts on a child's wellbeing and school readiness
- The Beanstalk programme was launched this year and will use volunteers to help with reading in schools

Save the Children is committed to using evidence based programmes. In terms of delivery, 40% of FAST is delivered at core level, 60% is local. There is an ongoing dilemma between delivering core programmes and adapting to local need. It is acknowledged that the real difficulty is engaging those most in need. FAST is a universal programme but is also targeted at schools with highest numbers of children receiving free school meals. The aim is to try to not make it obvious that there is targeting. This has had positive effects in terms of retention rates, with 80% retention during the 8 week programme.

Research suggests that 85% of a child's success at school is based on factors outside the classroom. Save the Children funding comes primarily from private sector, with some statutory funding. Looking beyond the statistics at individual stories of disadvantaged children is vital. Case studies indicate that the qualitative impact of such interventions can be huge at individual and family level.

The voluntary sector has: a good track record of service delivery; experience and expertise; access to funding; and the ability to be innovative, creative and flexible to local needs. It is a rich and valuable resource. For added value it is important to ensure that we all work together. The limited impact potential of early years' interventions shouldn't mean that interventions don't happen, but should ensure that the focus is on intervening in the right way and evaluating interventions effectively. Programmes should be critically evaluated to find out what works, in what context, and what can be taken forward.

Discussion

It was suggested that it would be useful to debate what the best ways are to assess impact, whether this be through randomised control trials (RCT's) or alternative methodologies. It was agreed that it was important to ensure that the appropriate methodology was being used for each intervention. It was agreed that it was important to design RCT's in a way that addresses the context. It was noted that in terms of interventions in the early years, impacts are likely to be relatively small and therefore RCT's may not always be needed. It was also noted that in terms of RCT's, it is the people included rather than those who drop out that are assessed. It could be those people that have dropped out which are most in need of the intervention.

It was agreed that it was also important to look at mainstream spending on health and education which aren't assessed in the same way as individual programmes.

It was noted that the Welsh Government committed to early years intervention 10 years ago. The amount of time required before this investment pays off is considerable, there are no quick wins. It was noted that the political timeframe is often much shorter than this and it is therefore important that decisions on interventions are made collectively between ministers to ensure longevity.

It was noted that the Welsh Government defines the early years as pre-birth to the end of the foundation phase. There is continued interest here across different departments.

It was noted that the FAST programme is tailored to individual needs, it was agreed that qualitative case studies are interesting.

It was suggested that one of the key transferable aspects of programmes that work may be that there is some flexibility about how they are delivered locally. It was agreed that it was important to ensure that the enthusiasm, interest and creativity that happens during the pilot phase of interventions is maintained. It was agreed that tailoring interventions to needs was also important.

It was noted that there is a body of evidence on what works best in terms of engagement. It was agreed that it is important to think about how best to target families and individuals.

It was noted that Save the Children doesn't deliver the FAST programme but trains local people to deliver it. It was suggested that it may be worth writing up data from across the Welsh Government and voluntary organisations on what works best in terms of engagement?

It was suggested that a key advantage of the voluntary sector is that people trust it; there is not the stigma of government intervention. It was noted that data from Flying Start indicated that in terms of that programme, this stigma had been addressed to a certain extent.

Families First is national programme. It was agreed that it would be useful if there were a method to assess the needs of the whole family rather than targeting children or adults. The WG are trying to ensure that they are not creating the impression of a failed family being given help. It was also noted that the WG doesn't have unlimited funding and must target those families most in need in some way. Flying Start is a key example of this and is seen as flagship programme, however, it is important to note that the programme will only target a third of families in poverty with children aged 0-4 years. It was noted that the emphasis in Flying Start has been on geographical distribution, the downside of this being that only a third of children in Wales are eligible.

It was suggested that interventions work because of people not policy. Programmes such as Flying Start and the Foundation Phase have been designed to allow people to do their thing, they therefore rely on people doing this well. One to one interventions work better according to evidence, but capacity to do this on large scale may be more limited in Wales than elsewhere.

It was noted that statistics can only give indications of the causality underneath. It is important to take care on interpreting, monitoring and evaluating performance over time. Including schools in the figures also means including other factors such as neighbourhood, play school etc.

It was noted that it was important to focus on what the ultimate goal is. Is it personal wellbeing; a well well-paid job; or education attainment? It was agreed that almost all parents want their children to become happy healthy successful people, however what this means to individual parents will differ and the amount that parents worry about this will also vary. It was noted also that parents don't always have the skills to embed these ambitions into behaviour which will lead towards these goals. It was noted that making changes by end of key stage 4 was vital.

It was agreed that home learning environment and wellbeing are vital. What is striking is that recent evidence suggests that despite this, educational outcomes aren't as forthcoming in Wales. It is important to figure out what can be done to improve this.

It was noted that England's attainment score is skewed positively by including London, why is that? It was reported that in general, white British children are more advanced in terms of their vocabulary by age 3 than other ethnic groups. However by age 7 they are behind. Why is this? Concentration of those groups can skew the statistics, making those regions with a high number of ethnic groups (such as London) seem to do better. Evidence suggests that ethnic groups have a particular attitude towards education and the value of learning; this can come at the expense of wellbeing, with parents pushing to increase reading levels but at the same time reducing a child's sense of wellbeing. Migrants are also often more innovative and entrepreneurial by the very nature of being migrants.

It was noted that there is survey evidence across Europe comparing teenager's feelings in comparison to international peers. UK teenagers are pretty happy and think that they are doing well; teenagers in Germany are less happy and think that they aren't doing well but are actually doing far better. It was noted that wellbeing is a long term goal. Teenagers may be happy in the short term but this is unlikely to last if they don't do well at school and become unemployed.

It was suggested that in terms of interventions, how you manage and enhance capacity is important and links back to the idea of what outcome you are aiming for. There are also long-term goals, for example, if people are unemployed but happier they can make a difference to the next generation of children. It is unknown how much value there is in people taking lower level jobs they are overqualified for, and how much they bring to the community. It was agreed that this needs to be balanced with the need to insure against unemployment and increased welfare costs. It is important to think pragmatically about what can be done within the current context.

It was noted that it is important to be conscious of caveats and limits to existing knowledge. We don't yet know longer term impacts of existing and past interventions; we may need to wait 20 years before this data is available.

It was agreed that clarity was needed as to whether the WG were focusing on early intervention in early years, or a quality experience throughout the early years. There is a need to be clear about what is likely to be achieved. It is also important to note that there are different levels. There are Families that need early intervention; and families that need sustained intervention beyond the early years. It was noted that whilst we may wait 20 years for overall impacts to become apparent, some interim impacts are evident already. It was agreed that to maximise the value of programmes it was important to pay attention to intermediate impacts, but only if the intervention has been designed on an outcomes based model which takes into account knock-on effects.

In terms of ministerial priorities, the fundamental issue is poverty. If all children were leaving school with excellent results we wouldn't be here. Ministers are interested in the early years, not because of the early years itself, but because of its implications for longer term poverty.

It was noted that what is important is appropriate and sustained intervention. It was reported that the reason why Flying Start is a universal programme is due to ministerial concern about stigmatisation. The priority in this area was always social justice and poverty. Flying Start is one piece of the wider jigsaw outlined in the tackling poverty action plan. Key stage one is where Families First comes in.

It was agreed that there was a need for more longitudinal studies to follow this up. It was suggested that the early years' assessment framework could potentially allow for this. It was agreed that it was important to find a way of flagging up children who have been involved in flying start in surveys.

It was suggested that in terms of three key things that make a difference, there is: a good home learning environment; high quality child care; and an effective primary school (it hasn't been defined what this means in practice). One or two of those it's good, but ideally all three are needed. We know that the early years phase is important, as is the transition from the foundation phase to key stage two.

Key questions to take forward are: how do we define the early years? What are the outcomes of good early years? What are the interventions that need to happen early when some of the things defined above aren't in place? All children need to have a good early years otherwise they will regress; some children need more help and support early on than others. Families need support to underpin this.

It was suggested that grandparents are an untapped resource, and that there was a need to take family a bit more seriously in Wales. It was agreed that quality childcare is important. Flying Start will need another 4500 child care places, this will involve employing an additional 150-160 health visitors.

It was noted that there was a changing dynamic of the number of people who need to work longer, possibly reducing the role of grandparents.

It was noted that evidence suggests that the role of aspirations can be important in influencing success.

It was noted that children in care is also a particular issue in Wales. The proportion of NEETs from children in care is high.

It was agreed that there are a set of issues around how the WG can understand drivers and points of intervention:

- Quality issues
- Need to be sharp about defining outcomes we want
- It's about quality of people on the ground - need the right people to deliver
- Capacity is also important

The approach the WG is currently putting in place is fundamental. It will take time to bed-in and build up the evidence base but will ultimately provide a means for beginning to understand the effectiveness of interventions more rigorously. This is basis for further research, analysis and discussion.