

The Effect of Early Childhood Education and Care Services in Latvia

Katrine Kūkoja

Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, more attention has been paid to social investment policies, especially the importance of investment in early childhood. A growing number of studies have shown that social investment at an early age has the highest returns in human capital and the main social investment instrument in this period of life is high-quality early childhood education and care services (hereafter – ECEC services). The importance of social investment in early childhood has been stressed in both Latvian and EU planning documents. One of the policy priorities defined by both the EC and the EP in order to meet the Europe2020 targets is to “ensure universal provision of ECEC”.

Previous research has shown that the successful implementation of social investment at an early age reduces crime, increases the future number of school graduates and skilled workers, and also brings individual benefits – better health, greater civil and social involvement. However, since most of these studies have been conducted in the US there is a lack of empirical research on social investment returns in Europe, and in Latvia. Until now, social investment returns have not been researched in Latvia.

The aim of this research is to see if early signs of positive change as a result of social investment can be observed, given that statistical data shows an expansion of ECEC in recent years in Latvia, especially for children who have not yet started compulsory education. The ECEC attendance rate has grown from 44.42% in 2010 to 54.43% in 2017.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study the author has analysed whether or not positive connections can be observed between ECEC attendance rate and eight indicators that have been positively connected with ECEC attendance rate in previous studies – educational attainments (3rd grade test results), school graduation rate, average income, teen pregnancy rate, fertility rate, female workforce participation rate, overall labour-force participation rate and crime rate.

To achieve the aims of the study, analyses of policy documents, previous research and statistical data were carried out. SPSS Software was used for data editing and analysis. Statistical data were analysed from the period 2010–2017, with exceptions in the case of high school graduation rate (2011–2017) and educational attainment (2012–2017) due to the lack of open access data available on these topics. To gain a deeper understanding of the research results that are connected with educational outcomes, 14 secondary school teachers from two schools in Valmiera were surveyed.

RESULTS

Research results show that in recent years a positive connection can be observed in Latvia between the ECEC attendance rate and fertility rate (0.879), female employment (0.981), overall employment (0.980), average income (0.955) and teen pregnancy (-0.967). Results show that ECEC services can be one of the factors that have positively influenced these indicators.

A weaker connection can be observed when we look at the high school graduation rate (0.703) and crime level reduction (-0.786). However, research results showed that there is no connection between ECEC attendance rate and educational attainment (average state examination results of 3rd graders in mathematics (-0.110) and learning language (0.111)).

CONCLUSION

There has been an increase in social investment in early age in Latvia, and it has already had some economic and socio-economic outcomes. However, despite the fact that literature suggests the effect of ECEC on educational attainment can be observed the earliest, results showed that this is not true in the case of Latvia. Surveys of 1st-grade teachers suggested that this kind of situation may occur due to ECEC quality problems, so further studies in this field should be carried out.

KEYWORDS

Child's development, early childhood education and care services, social investment return, women employment.