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**Inequity is the imperative of our time: Notes from the Congress on Early Childhood Education.
Paris June 6-8**

Bring government, business, academics and civic leaders together to generate action to improve opportunities for young children and the challenges can appear insurmountable.

In rich countries, one in seven children lives in a family with an income below the national poverty lines. For children from migrant families the number is one-in-three. The 2008 recession drove more children into poverty and they have not been part of the recovery.

Children around the globe are paying a high price for the large and often rising inequalities between rich and poor. Poverty eats at the life chances of the young. Children from low-income families are more likely to suffer from poor health, struggle in school, report having less satisfactory relationships with friends and even see their parents less often than their better off peers. Economic progress in developing countries often excludes children, who are coerced into child labour and experience intense poverty, insufficient education and extreme environmental degradation.

Children do not out-grow poverty. Income inequality can intensify between generations. Education can be a great equalizer yet one-in-six young adults in affluent countries have lower levels of education than their parents.

State of youth a matter of national security

U.S. retired Rear Admiral Robert Besal described the implications for his country. An astonishing 71 percent of youth between the ages of 18 and 25 are not eligible to join the armed forces due to poor health, low literacy skills, and/or a criminal record. This restricts the pool of potential recruits, not only for the military, but for business, the public sector and civil society. More troubling is the internal threat to democratic society posed by a dispossessed generation pushed to the margins and ripe for radicalization. "The state of our youth is a matter of national security," Besal said.

The grim statistics generated understandable concern but hope also populated the proceedings of last week's Early Childhood Education Action Congress in Paris. The event was hosted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which brings together 34 governments from the world's most affluent nations, together with an international consortium of children's charities.



L to R: Nathalie Casso-Vicarini, Ensemble for Education; Isabelle Vincent, Centre for Excellence for Early Childhood Development; Kerry McCuaig, Atkinson Centre; Jane Bertrand, Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation; Eric Charbonnier, Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD

While children have the least control over their economic circumstances they also have the most to gain from intentional interventions. Public policy designed to benefit children does make a difference.



Kerry McCuaig, Atkinson Centre

Linking research and policy

Evidence documenting what works and what does not can guide policy-making. It also generates trust in publics grown sceptical about the capacity of governments to act effectively. Efforts aimed at improving children's health, education and material well-being are cost effective when begun early and sustained. Early childhood education, particularly when integrated with childcare and linked to health, nutrition and family supports, can be the most critical of these domains.

Research demonstrates how early education provides a protection for children, particularly those living in poverty. It contributes to language and numeracy skills, better self-confidence and more

pro-social behaviour. These competencies in early life in turn impact adult employment, income and health.

Who has access to preschool education matters, but as important are how well preschools are resources and the skills of educators. More children attend early education but arrangements differ substantially between the more- and less-affluent. Since the quality of early education is tied to the intellectual, social and emotional benefits children receive, abandoning some children to less formal or lower quality programs exacerbates social inequality.

Governments have the levers to reduce disparities by setting and enforcing standards, supporting a qualified workforce and providing free or subsidized tuitions. While perceptions persist that poor children should be the targets of public supports, research documents that children from disadvantaged families in fact do better in programs attended by children from across the economic spectrum. Meanwhile public support for preschool rises in tandem with middle class access.

The struggle for action

Despite a consensus around the social costs of poverty in early childhood, and a growing understanding of the ameliorating effects of quality early education, the response of policy makers has been tepid. According to the analysts low support circulates around two poles. First, preschool for all is a big-ticket item out-voiced by calls to limit public spending. Second, moderate-income families will feel less inclined to pay for others when struggling to meet the costs of rearing their own children.

This is where delegates were urged to circulate back and to recruit unusual advocates such as the Rear Admiral to influence the dialogue and enlighten policy makers. Early education is not just something nice to do, Beal said. It is foundational to addressing the limitations that inequity places on us all.

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