Invest in the Very Young a

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Learning starts in infancy, long before formal education begins, and continues throughout life. Early learning begets later learning and early success breeds later success, just as early failure breeds later failure. Success or failure at this stage lays the foundation for success or failure in school, which in turn leads to success or failure in post-school learning. Recent studies of early childhood investments have shown remarkable success and indicate that the early years are important for early learning. Moreover, early childhood interventions of high quality have lasting effects on learning and motivation. As a society, we cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults, nor can we wait until they reach school age – a time when it may be too late to intervene.

However, current policies regarding education and job training are based on fundamental misconceptions about the way socially useful skills embodied in persons are produced. By focusing on cognitive skills as measured by achievement of IQ tests, they exclude the critical importance of social skills, self-discipline and a variety of non-cognitive skills that are known to determine success in life. Furthermore, this preoccupation with cognition and academic “smarts” as measured by test scores to the exclusion of social adaptability and motivation causes a serious bias in the evaluation of the human capital interventions.

Another common error in the analysis of human capital policies is the assumption that abilities are fixed at very early ages. This static conception of ability is at odds with a large body of research in the child development literature. More specifically, research has shown that, in the early years of life, basic abilities can be altered. A more corrective view of ability (or rather abilities) is that they are developed in a variety of learning situations and that early ability in turn fosters further learning.

Also missing from current policy discussion of education and training policy is any consideration of priorities or recognition of the need to prioritize. Unfortunately, in an era of tight government budgets, it is impractical to consider active investment program for all persons. The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: invest in the very young and improve basic learning and socialization skills.

Note

[a] Adapted from the paper “The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: Invest in the very young,” published by the Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Studies. 2000. The present paper has been approved by Dr. Heckman.