Center for American Progress

The School-Readiness Gap and Preschool Benefits for Children of Color

By Farah Z. Ahmad and Katie Hamm November 12, 2013

The majority of children under age 1 in the United States today are children of color; that one simple fact means that our future will be very different from our current reality.[1] Before we reach the end of this decade, more than half of all youth in this country will be of color.[2] Today, Hispanics are 17 percent of the population, and African Americans make up another 13 percent.[3] But by 2043, the United States' population will be majority people of color.[4] A large portion of this growth will come from the Hispanic community, which will grow to 28 percent of the U.S. population by 2050.[5] Because we know where the United States is headed, we have a unique opportunity to make the most of this knowledge and prepare today for tomorrow's future. As the face of our nation changes, our nation's policies will need to change as well. And while change is never easy, we know the place to start is where the change is already happening—and that means investing in our nation's youngest citizens.

The school-readiness gap

We must prepare our children for the future by giving them the educational foundation that predicates so much of future success, and that starts with quality early childhood education. Access to high-quality preschool is central to school readiness, and school readiness can significantly impact everything from reading at grade level to graduating high school to being career ready later in life.[6] Given that many children of color already face the challenge of poverty—42.5 percent of African American children under age 5 and 37.1 percent of Hispanic children under age 5[7]—access to high-quality preschool could have positive, long-lasting, and compounding effects on future success. But recent data from 2011 show that more than half of African American children and 63 percent of Hispanic children ages 3 to 4 do not attend preschool.[8]

Access to high-quality preschool is particularly needed for low-income children of color, who often start kindergarten behind their peers.[9] By school entry, the gap between the wealthiest children and the poorest children is already pronounced.[10] Children from low-income families are a year or more behind their more advantaged peers. By age 4, low-income children have heard 30 million fewer words than children from more-affluent families and have vocabularies that are half as extensive.[11] The gaps that start at an early age only grow larger, and catching up becomes ever more difficult. By the first grade, for example, there is a full one-year reading gap between English language learners and native English speakers—a gap that increases to a two-year gap by the fifth-grade.[12] This is especially troublesome given that as today's children of color grow and mature, they will become America's future workforce. African Americans and Hispanics combined will comprise 42 percent of the U.S. workforce in 2050, a vast increase from today, as the two groups now make up just 27 percent of the workforce.[13]

High-quality preschool can narrow the school-readiness gap

Fortunately, high-quality preschool programs have been shown to reduce the school-readiness gap, especially for low-income children of color.[14] Over the past decade, 40 states have initiated state-funded preschool programs, which serve about one-quarter of all 4-year-olds.[15] A handful of states, including Oklahoma and Georgia, serve most of their 4-year-olds. Findings from these preschool programs, coupled with findings from longitudinal studies conducted over the past several decades, have shown that high-quality preschool can improve school readiness, particularly for children of color and children who are non-native English speakers.

Children who attend a high-quality early learning program gain four months of learning, on average.[16] The highest-quality programs can produce up to a year of additional learning.[17] In addition, children see gains throughout their lives—from improved graduation rates and earnings to decreased rates of crime and adolescent pregnancy. Children who are the most vulnerable, particularly low-income children of color, benefit the most from participation in high-quality preschool.[18]

As preschool programs have grown over the past 10 years, so has the body of research on the outcomes for children who participate in them. Nearly all of these studies have shown that children make significant gains when they attend high-quality preschool programs.[19] This finding is true for children from diverse backgrounds, including all income levels and across racial and ethnic groups.[20] Children who are low income do seem to benefit the most, however, and some research suggests benefits to certain demographic subgroups. Several state preschool evaluations have explored the impact of these programs on specific racial and ethnic groups. Below, we examine the findings of these studies for Hispanic, African American, and Asian American children, as well as for children for whom English is not the primary language in the home.

African American children

Many of the foundational studies examining the impact of early childhood education programs focused on African American children. These include the 1960s groundbreaking HighScope Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Preschool program in the 1970s, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers founded in 1967. While it is not possible to compare the impact of these programs across racial groupings, the impact of these early learning programs on the low-income African American children who participated was pronounced and long term. For instance, children who participated in the Perry Preschool Project were more likely to complete high school, become employed, and avoid incarceration.[21] These three longitudinal studies define the significant impact that intensive preschool interventions can have on very low-income African American children.

State preschool programs also seem to have substantial benefits for African American children, along with children of other races and ethnicities. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, African American children made gains on tests measuring early literacy skills and problem-solving skills. Gains in early literacy were comparable to the gains made by white children, but gains in problem-solving skills were substantially higher for African American children than for their white peers.[22] In problem solving, white children made a 6 percent gain throughout the preschool year, while African American children made a 21 percent gain. Similarly, a study of the Boston Public Schools' preschool program also found benefits for children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including African American children. On 3 out of 12 developmental assessments, African American children made stronger gains than white children.[23]

Hispanic children

Several state and community preschool programs have demonstrated particularly strong impacts for Hispanic children. A 2008 study of Oklahoma's universal preschool program conducted in Tulsa showed positive results for all racial and ethnic groups, but impacts were particularly strong for Hispanic children. On measures of early literacy skills and problem solving, Hispanic children made greater gains than any other subgroup.[24]

Similarly, an evaluation of Boston's universal preschool program found especially large gains for Hispanic children, even though all children there saw gains. Hispanic children showed higher gains in measures of vocabulary, early literacy skills, and problem solving. Importantly, Hispanic children made significant gains on measures of "inhibition" and "attention shifting." These skills, sometimes referred to as "executive functioning," are thought to provide the underpinnings for skills such as self-discipline and the ability to shift concentration between tasks.[25]

Asian Americans

Data from 2011 show that 48 percent of Asian American 3- and 4-year-olds do not attend preschool.[26] While this rate is better than the rates of Hispanic and African American children, this information reflects Asian American children in aggregate as a single group only and, due to limited data, does not take often into account variations among Asian subpopulations, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, which often differ significantly. Few studies have examined the impact of preschool programs on Asian Americans as a subgroup, oftentimes due to low sample size. The study of Boston's public preschool program did examine specific impacts on Asian Americans but noted that the sample size was small. In Boston, Asian American children made more gains than white children on several domains of child development. In particular, Asian American children made significant gains on applied problem solving.[27]

English language learners

There is considerable overlap between English language learners and Hispanic children in the existing studies of state preschool programs. Several state preschool evaluations, however, have specifically looked at the impact on children from homes where English is not the primary language or those children with limited English proficiency. In most cases, the vast majority of children spoke Spanish as their primary language. Every study that looked at this population found substantial benefits to children who participated in preschool.

Spanish-speaking children in Tulsa's preschool program made substantial language gains but also made gains in early literacy and math skills. Researchers estimate that the gains made by Spanish-speaking children are comparable to those made in the landmark Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian project, both of which have documented long-term gains for children throughout their life cycles, including reduced crime and teen pregnancy, higher earnings, and reduced participation in public assistance programs. In comparison to other Hispanic children enrolled in Tulsa's preschool program, English language learners and children with at least one parent born in Mexico made the most significant gains.[28]

In Georgia, Spanish-speaking children improved on a range of language and literacy, math, and general-knowledge assessments. On several domains, gains made by Spanish-speaking children were much higher than in the full sample. Spanish-speaking children made particularly large gains in vocabulary—both receptive and expressive—and mathematical problem solving.[29]

In Tennessee, non-native English speakers made larger gains than English speakers. Non-native English speakers who attended preschool had 85 percent greater gains on measures of language development than did other non-native English speakers who did not attend preschool. Native English speakers who attended preschool also made gains when compared to those who did not attend, but those gains were 27 percent higher.[30]

Looking forward

Today's preschoolers will soon be the pillars of our country's economy. But before they join the labor force and contribute to strengthening our nation's economy, these children of color must first successfully navigate the school experience. Children of color are already almost half of the pre-K-12 population—in 2010, white students made up 54 percent of the national pre-K-12 student population, a fall from just a decade earlier, in 1990, when white students made up 67 percent of the pre-K-12 population.[31] Completing high school will not be enough for many people to make a family-supporting living in the future. In fact, just five years from now, in 2018, 45 percent of all jobs will require an associate's degree or higher.[32] But today, only 27 percent of African Americans, 26 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics, and 14 percent of Hispanic women immigrants have that level of education.[33] As communities of color become an increasingly large share of the U.S. workforce, this is especially troubling. If rates of educational attainment remain where they are today, and the training and education required for jobs becomes more rigorous, we will not have a workforce prepared for the future. Census projections over the next 10 years show there will be 36 million job openings that will require some education beyond high school, but we will not have the workers to fill those jobs; indeed, we will fall short by an estimated 5 million workers.[34]

Preparing our future workforce benefits not only individuals and their families but also our nation's economy. Had we closed the academic-performance gaps of African American and Hispanic students in 2008, the United States would have gained between $310 billion and $525 billion in gross domestic product, or GDP.[35] Although we did not do it then, we have the opportunity to do it now. Americans are ready. A recent nationwide poll, released in October 2013 by the Center for American Progress, shows that gaps in education levels for African Americans and Hispanics are viewed as one of the most serious problems associated with inequality in our nation.[36] According to the poll, 88 percent of respondents viewed the fact that, "Forty-eight percent of black eighth graders and 43 percent of Latino eighth graders score below basic on math and reading tests, compared to 17 percent of whites" as a very serious or a serious problem.[37]

What's more heartening is that Americans do not view this as a problem that exists in a silo: Survey results showed that Americans strongly support a new equity agenda designed to reduce racial and ethnic inequality.[38] More than 70 percent of respondents support taking steps toward achieving this agenda through investments in areas such as education, job training, and infrastructure improvement, including a majority of support from non-Hispanic whites.[39] Furthermore, more than half of Americans—54 percent—say such steps would help the economy overall, and a 61 percent majority of Americans say they would be willing to invest "significantly more public funds to help close [the] gap in college graduation rates" between African American and Hispanic students and their white peers.[40]

Closing these gaps in college graduation rates begins with closing the gaps before they start to grow and requires investing in early childhood education. Better access to preschool programs will give all children a better chance of being school ready, successfully finishing high school, and being career ready. Investing in early childhood education means that our country and our economy stand to gain significantly and that we will become a more prosperous America for future generations. The good news is that Americans have the resolve to see it accomplished.

Farah Z. Ahmad is a Policy Analyst for Progress 2050 at the Center for American Progress. Katie Hamm is the Director of Early Childhood Policy at the Center.

Endnotes

1 Vanessa Cárdenas and Sarah Treuhaft, eds., *All-In Nation: An America that Works for All* (Washington; and Oakland, CA: Center for American Progress and PolicyLink, 2013), available at http://allinnation.org/.

2 Cárdenas and Treuhaft, eds., *All-In Nation*.

3 Author's calculations from American Community Survey Demographic and Housing Estimates. See U.S. Census Bureau, "2012 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates," available at http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_12_1YR_DP05&prodType=table (last accessed November 2013).

4 Hope Yen, "Census: White majority in U.S. gone by 2043," U.S. News blog, June 13, 2013, available at http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/06/13/18934111-census-white-majority-in-us-gone-by-2043.

5 Cárdenas and Treuhaft, eds., *All-In Nation*.

6 Juliana Herman, "Access to Public Preschool Matters," Center for American Progress, July 2, 2013, available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/news/2013/07/02/68639/access-to-public-preschool-matters/.

7 Children's Defense Fund, "Child Poverty in America 2012: National Analysis" (2013), available at http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/child-poverty-in-america-2012.pdf.

8 Kids Count Data Center, "Children Ages 3 To 4 Who Are Not Attending Preschool By Race," available at http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/7681-children-ages-3-to-4-who-are-not-attending-preschool-by-race#detailed/1/any/false/995,932,757,470,116/13,1,9,168,10,12,185/14838,14839 (last accessed November 2013).

9 Michael Sadowski, "The School Readiness Gap," *Harvard Education Letter* 22 (4) (2006): 1–2, available at http://hepg.org/hel/article/307.

10 Lisa Klein and Jane Knitzer, "Promoting Effective Learning: What Every Policymaker Should Know" (New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007), available at http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_695.pdf.

11 Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, "The Early Catastrophe," *Education Review 77* (1) (2004): 100–118.

12 Cárdenas and Treuhaft, eds., *All-In Nation*.

13 Ibid.

14 Katherine A. Magnuson and Jane Waldfogel, "Early Childhood Care and Education: Effects on Ethnic and Racial Gaps in School Readiness," *The Future of Children* 15 (1) (2005): 169–196, available at http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/15_01_09.pdf.

15 W. Steven Barnett and others, "The State of Preschool 2012: State Preschool Yearbook" (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2012), available at http://www.nieer.org/publications/state-preschool-2012.

16 Hirokazu Yoshikawa and others, "Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education" (Ann Arbor, MI; and New York: Society for Research in Child Development and Foundation for Child Development, 2013), available at http://www.srcd.org/sites/default/files/documents/washington/mb_2013_10_16_investing_in_children.pdf.

17 Ibid.

18 Katherine A. Magnuson, Christopher J. Ruhm, and Jane Waldfogel, "Does Prekindergarten Improve School Preparation and Performance?" (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2004), available at www.nber.org/papers/w10452.

19 National Institute for Early Education Research, "Fast Facts Summary: Getting the Facts Right on Pre-K and the President's Pre-K Proposal" (2013), available at http://www.nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/Getting%20the%20Facts%20Right%20on%20Pre-K%20Fast%20Facts%20Summary.pdf.

20 Ibid.

21 Lawrence J. Schweinhart and others, "*Lifetime effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*," *Monographs of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation* 14 (2005).

22 William Gormley Jr. and others, "The Effects of Oklahoma's Universal Pre-K Program on School Readiness" (Washington: Georgetown University Center for Research on Children in the U.S., 2004), available at http://www.crocus.georgetown.edu/reports/executive_summary_11_04.pdf.

23 Christina Weiland and Hirokazu Yoshikawa, "Impacts of a Prekindergarten Program on Children's Mathematics, Language, Literacy, Executive Function, and Emotional Skills," *Child Development* (2013), available at http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.12099/abstract.

24 William T. Gormley Jr., "The Effects of Oklahoma's Pre-K Program on Hispanic Children" (Washington: Georgetown University Center for Research on Children in the U.S., 2008), available at http://www.crocus.georgetown.edu/reports/CROCUSworkingpaper11.pdf.

25 Weiland and Yoshikawa, "Impacts of a Prekindergarten Program on Children's Mathematics, Language, Literacy, Executive Function, and Emotional Skills."

26 Kids Count Data Center, "Children Ages 3 To 4 Who Are Not Attending Preschool By Race."

27 Weiland and Yoshikawa, "Impacts of a Prekindergarten Program on Children's Mathematics, Language, Literacy, Executive Function, and Emotional Skills."

28 Gormley, "The Effects of Oklahoma's Pre-K Program on Hispanic Children."

29 Ellen Peisner-Feinberg, Jennifer Schaaf, and Doré LaForett, "Children's Growth and Classroom Experiences in Georgia's Pre-K Program: Findings from the 2011–2012 Evaluation Study" (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute), available at http://decal.ga.gov/documents/attachments/GAPreKEval2011-2012Report.pdf.

30 Mark W. Lipsey and others, "Evaluation of the Tennessee Voluntary Prekindergarten Program: End of Pre-K Results from the Randomized Control Design" (Nashville, TN: Peabody Research Institute, Vanderbilt University), available at http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/research/pri/TN_VPK_Evaluation_Technical_Report_Appendices_5_5_13.pdf.

31 Cárdenas and Treuhaft, eds., *All-In Nation*.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin, with Matt Barreto and Adrian Pantoja, "Building an All-In Nation: A View from the American Public" (Washington; Oakland, CA; and New York: Center for American Progress and PolicyLink, in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation, 2013), available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/report/2013/10/22/77665/building-an-all-in-nation/.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.