No Preschooler Left Behind

The Need for High Quality Early Intervention for Children Born into Poverty

Vicky Schippers

Introduction

For over a decade I have tutored children both in first grade and older students who are struggling to pass their New York State exit exams in order to receive a high school diploma. The elementary school where I work serves a diverse group of youngsters. While it sits in an upper middle class neighborhood, it also draws a substantial number of students from a nearby publicly-funded housing project.

The first graders I work with are from the project and are either Black or Hispanic. The older students I work with come from a similar demographic. It is obvious to me that my first graders are already at a huge educational disadvantage. My older students are so far behind their middle class peers that any chance of living a productive life even if they graduate seems unlikely.

Over this past decade I have become increasingly certain that the only way to level the educational playing field for children born into poverty is to provide high quality early intervention programs beginning as early as birth, but definitely no later than age three.

> A five-year-old who enters school recognizing some words and who has turned pages of many stories will be easier to teach than one who has rarely held a book. The second child can be taught, but, with equally high expectations and effective teaching, the first will more likely pass a reading test than the second. And so the achievement gap begins. (Rothstein, 2004)

It is a sad fact that children born into poverty are far less likely to perform well in school and to finish school. Their inadequate schooling then negatively affects their degree of economic success at a large cost to society.

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Review of Relevant Literature

There is an abundant quantity of literature that supports this view. While referring to other studies, I pay particular attention to the High/Scope Perry project, including an interview I conducted with Lawrence Schweinhart, its current head. I also refer to the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child Parent Center Program as well as a quote from an interview with Richard Rothstein, research associate at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C.

The studies I cite each describe long-term projects that show the differences between children who had the benefit of high quality early intervention programs and those from similar backgrounds who did not. In addition, I discuss Educare, a newer initiative with 18 centers nationwide, whose goal is to support very young children from disadvantaged backgrounds with appropriate intervention at different stages in order to prepare them to do well in school.

Background of Four Students

I have tutored low-income first graders and teens for over a decade. The high school where I work serves students who have not graduated by age 18 but can remain in school until they turn 21 provided they complete their course work and receive at least a 65 on five state-mandated exit exams. For my students, passing the exams is nearly impossible.

Even if they manage to graduate, their prospects are dismal. They have short attention spans, difficulty reading, very poor vocabularies, and no executive functioning abilities. In this article I compare their prospects to the outcomes of the youngsters who attended the high quality early intervention programs cited above and demonstrate that it is worth the cost to provide such educational intervention through nationwide collaborations between public and private sectors to children from disadvantaged homes. I make this argument because the costs of such early intervention are much less than the later cost to society in terms of dollars that must be spent on a non-productive population.

My students Deserie, Tony, Sofia and Jahari (all names are pseudonyms) are perfect examples of young people who experienced no early high quality intervention programs. Each is already 20 and each dropped out of high school for two or more years. Two of them are already parents. None of them have good executive functioning in terms of working memory or being able to pay attention to the task at hand. All four show the effects of extreme poverty.

Deserie

Deserie is African American. Her ancestors were slaves in South Carolina. Her parents never married. She has a biological brother and two half siblings from a different father. She has no memory of her mother playing or reading with her or taking her to playgrounds. Her mother had held odd jobs occasionally but mostly she hung around the house drinking beer. Deserie remembers her father stopping by occasionally when she was small, drinking and starting fights with her mother. She says her brothers are deadbeats who don't try to find jobs.

She currently lives in a city-run shelter with her mother where the police are called on a regular basis. Deserie herself has had altercations with the law, mostly the result of getting into physical fights. She has no particular work goal if she graduates and although she speaks of attending college, she has no clue how to go about that process.

Tony

Tony is Hispanic. His parents emigrated

to Brooklyn from the Dominican Republic before he was born. He is the oldest with four younger sisters. One, 19, has brain injuries from an earlier accident. The family is intact and close to one another, although as a small child, Tony received little attention since the family was large and his mother was preoccupied with her brain-injured daughter.

The family lives in a housing project where the police are a constant presence. Tony has a four-year-old son who lives with him. He dropped out of school at 16 when his son was born and is now scrambling to catch up. His parents have had odd jobs in laundromats, as health care aides, and in security but they subsist mainly on Medicaid and food stamps.

A heavily tattooed gang member, Tony has been arrested several times, usually because of drug possession. He has a history of making poor choices in companions and like many of his peers he has a hard time with the concept of cause and effect. He has no idea what he'd like to do if he graduates other than a vague notion of being a mechanic or cook.

Sofia

Sofia is also Hispanic. Her parents emigrated from Ecuador before she was born. They separated when she was small, and Sofia does not see her father. She lives with her mother, a younger sister, a brother, and a boyfriend with whom she has a two-year-old. She has always struggled in school, but never received any special help. Neither her mother nor teachers ever suggested testing or extra help.

She spent three years in high school not progressing beyond 9th grade. She then moved to her current school where I am tutoring her. Here she has been tested and will be able to take her final exams with extra time and have the questions read to her. She and her family live primarily on Medicaid and food stamps.

Her boyfriend is an undocumented alien who works off-the-books jobs whenever he can find them to help the family. Sofia remembers very little from before she was five and started kindergarten. She did not go to daycare or preschool and does not remember being read to or played with. She does remember being shuttled from relative to relative for childcare.

Jahari

Jahari is African American and lives with his single mother and several sisters. He does not remember anything about his early childhood. He does not get along well with his mother and is in constant trouble with the law. He has been in a gang for most of his teen years.

Twice since I have tutored him, Jahari has been arrested, once for jumping out of a window when the police raided a party he was attending and once when he was stopped and searched for drugs and swung at an officer. Although with some effort he could pass his exam, Jahari frequently misses our sessions and will probably fail once again a test he has already failed three times.

Why Is High Quality Early Intervention Important?

The gap in skill development between advantaged and disadvantaged children emerges early and can predict academic achievement in later years. Children who enter kindergarten with stronger school readiness skills tend to maintain their advantage while children with lower skills remain at a disadvantage. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty. If children born into poverty do not perform well in school, they are more likely to drop out and consequently fare poorly in the job market (Halle, Ferry, Hair, Perper, Wandner, Wessel, & Vick, 2009).

James Heckman, who has studied the problems of how children from disadvantaged homes fare in school, says that expecting schools to make up for what these children lacked in their earliest years is unfair. He says, "The family is a major producer of the skills and motivation required to providing successful students and workers" (Heckman, 2004). Because he believes that early disadvantage if left untreated leads to academic and social difficulties in later years, he is one of the strongest proponents of enriched preschool centers for the poor.

Social class differences show up very early. Numerous studies show that middle class parents speak often to their preverbal children whereas poor parents do not. When middle class parents read to their children they are more likely to ask questions like "What do you think will happen next? and "Does that remind you of what we did yesterday?" Through such conversations, middle class children develop their vocabularies and become familiar with contexts for reading at school (Rothstein, 2004.)

New advances in understanding early brain development show that foundations of learning are developed early, long before children start kindergarten. Research from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2011) indicates that emotional and physical health, social skills, and cognitive-language capacities that emerge in the first years are prerequisites for later success in school and life. In fact, the achievement gap shows up as early as nine months (Halle et al, 2009).

According to Hart and Risley (2003), although all children begin speaking around the same time, by age three children on welfare had vocabularies of 500 words compared with middle class children who spoke 1,100 words. Another study shows that by age three the children of professionals had larger vocabularies themselves than the adults from welfare families (Rothstein, 2004). Unsettling as this is, it is not surprising since children of poverty do not spend their earliest years in vocabulary-rich settings.

Virtually all researchers agree that social background factors are associated with school success (Lee & Burkham, 2002). Studies have demonstrated that a mother speaking to her child—how much, how elaborately and how often she initiates verbal exchanges—is closely linked to the child's vocabulary development, which in turn is associated with school performance (Hart & Risley, 2003.)

An exhausted out-of-work single mother on welfare, who may not have a strong vocabulary herself, is not as likely to interact with her small children in this important way. Parents who speak early to their youngsters, who read books and interact with them, have children with greater verbal ability, larger vocabularies, more confidence with authority figures, and more familiarity with abstract concepts. Parents of poor children use their more limited means to provide food and shelter but are less likely to directly cultivate and nourish their children's cognitive and social skills (Lareau, 2003).

Socioeconomic status is closely tied to race and ethnicity with 34% of Black children and 29% of Hispanic children in the lowest quintile. Since socioeconomic status is very closely aligned with cognitive ability, this poses a large problem for these children when they start kindergarten (Lee & Burkham, 2002).

The logic underlying early intervention is that providing age-appropriate enrichment opportunities will enhance a child's cognitive development. The child will then enter school ready to succeed, which will pay off later through higher paying jobs and other social and cultural rewards (Campbell & Ramey, 1994).

High quality childhood programs generate benefits to society that exceed program costs. Economists have shown that investments in early childhood produce the greatest benefits. These returns,

> . . . which can range from $4 to $9 per dollar invested, benefit the community through reduced crime, welfare, and educational remediation, as well as increased tax revenues on higher incomes for the participants of early childhood programs when they reach adulthood. (Center on the Developing Child, 2007)

Clearly the family is a major backbone in providing the skills and motivation required to develop school-ready children. While middle class families can offer vacations, and trips to museums and libraries, poor families are often not in this position. A child learning letters in kindergarten will be at a disadvantage when asked to name the letter Z by identifying a zebra or J by identifying a jet.

With regard to this problem, Richard Rothstein says that he strongly believes that if students enter kindergarten in unequal circumstances that by and large, they are unlikely to catch up and will leave schools with unequal skills and abilities, both in cognitive and non-cognitive areas (R. Rothstein, personal interview, June 21, 2013.)

What Is a High Quality Program?

Although high quality programs do not always have the same approaches, they are consistent in their belief in a highly qualified and well-compensated staff —key to all the best programs—with a low teacher-to-child ratio and a focus on staff support and retention. Government run Head Start and Early Head Start programs vary in quality and they have garnered much criticism for their lack of consistency. Head Start draws its teachers from the low-income communities they serve and pays them poorly. While Head Start may function as an employment and parent empowerment program, there is no proof that it helps children academically when they enter school.

A high quality program also monitors the progress of its children as well as supporting and encouraging parental involvement. Three programs, the so-called trio of early childhood studies that offer the best evidence of the long-term effects of high quality preschool, are the High/Scope Perry Project, the Carolina Abecedarian Program, and the Chicago Parent Child Centers Study. Each began as a long-term preschool project with follow up studies. Each has done cost-benefit analyses of its programs and found significant returns on program investments in terms of education performance, crime prevention, age at birth of first child and other predictors of success.

The High/Scope Perry Project

The High/Scope Perry Project is the oldest of the trio and is unique in that it remains an ongoing study. Its participants are approaching age 50 and have been followed in studies at ages 19, 27, and 39-41. The program ran from 1962-1967 serving three and four year olds in Ypsilanti, Michigan, through a part-day preschool program. Run by the Michigan Department of Education, its teachers had BAs in both elementary and special education. High/Scope did not just focus on literacy and math skills but on the whole child in terms of intellectual, social and physical development.

A sample of 123 low-income African-American children was identified, with 58 assigned to a group that received a high quality preschool program with a large ratio of teachers to children; 65 children were assigned to a group that received no preschool. The children participated for two-and-a-half hours each weekday morning from October through May, and the staff made weekly home visits in the afternoon.

The most recent follow up study started when the participants turned 40. It found that the adults who had participated in the preschool program had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes and were more likely to have graduated from high school than the adults were who did not participate. Benefits to society per dollar invested were calculated at $17.07, in 2000 dollars discounted at 3% annually (Schweinhart, Montie, Barnett, Belfield, Nores, 2005). Thus, the High/Scope Perry study, which continues to follow its subjects as they turn 50 years of age, has shown that its benefits, including economic performance, extend to mid-life.

The Carolina Abecedarian Program

The Carolina Abecedarian Program began as a research project at the University of North Carolina in 1972. It differed from High/Scope because it was a full-day, year-round program with children from five months to kindergarten. The program randomly assigned 111 infants from poor families and compared them with a similar group who attended what was a typical childcare program for 1972. The special program's goal was to prepare children for school success. It offered babies and toddlers excellent physical care, high quality adult/child interaction, and many playthings. Preschoolers were exposed to a developmentally appropriate learning environment and parents were taught the significance of what their youngsters were learning and how to model appropriate behavior.

The groups were 98% African American, mostly from female-headed homes. The Abecedarian project found that its preschool program benefited students throughout their schooling in terms of school achievement and graduation rates. Beneficiaries also were older when they had their first child. Analysis of the costs and benefits showed that the program yielded society a benefit of $3.78 per participant (Schweinhart et al., 2005).

The Chicago Parent Child Centers Study

The Chicago Parent Child Centers study, run by the Chicago public school system in 1985, was much larger and was citywide. It included 1,539 low-income children aged three and four of whom 93% were African American and 7% Hispanic. Its guiding principle was to provide a school-based, stable learning environment where parents were active participants. For the high quality program, 989 youngsters were selected, as compared with the 550 who were not. Like the Abecedarian project, the CPC program emphasized attainment of skills necessary to do well starting in kindergarten.

Like the other two, the Chicago program offered parental outreach and support. The CPC program yielded society a benefit of $7.10 per participant. These included reductions in expenses for school remedial services, reductions in criminal justice expenses for both juvenile and adult arrests and treatment, reduction in child welfare expenses, and increases in adult earnings (Reynolds 2000).

Similar Results

Although differing in ways, each of these programs showed that when offered high quality early intervention, both from birth or starting at three, children beat many of the odds stacked against them compared with those in the control groups who did not participate. Their advantages were in school success, graduation

rates, less crime and incarceration, fewer early pregnancies and for the long-running High/Scope Perry study, greater economic successes (Schweinhart et al., 2005). All three clearly demonstrated the benefits of adequately supported, professionally run programs.

According to Lawrence Schweinhart, few long-term studies have shown that Abecedarian's birth-to-three, full-day program did any better at improving its children's outcomes over those of Perry/High Scope's children who started at three and attended for a half day. This has important cost implications, as a half-day program that begins at age three will cost significantly less than a full-day birth-to-five program (L. Schweinhart, personal interview, May 14, 2013.)

How to Finance High Quality Early Intervention Projects

In his second State of the Union Address, President Obama said that youngsters who entered school with poor vocabularies, not knowing numbers and shapes, and unable to focus were doomed to be behind on the first day. He articulated the need for federal/state partnerships to finance high quality preschool for all low to moderate income four year olds. He also pointed to the need for similar quality care for children from birth to three years of age by increasing investments for Early Head Start and childcare that meets high standards.

Worthy as this goal is, if history offers any lesson it faces an uphill battle. The need for early childhood education was seriously considered by our government as early as the 1970s when Senator Walter Mondale successfully managed a bipartisan effort to make quality preschool available to all American children. President Richard Nixon vetoed the bill on the grounds that it would detract from family life. President George W. Bush also showed interest in a national effort to have all children achieve literacy and educational success. His goal was to harness Head Start and other preschool programs toward this effort. His proposal went nowhere.

Today there is another groundswell, this focused on our most needy children. But our increasingly partisan government is already putting up roadblocks. President Obama's idea for financing his program is based on a new cigarette tax. But lawmakers like Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, a state with a large stake in tobacco, has stated that he is opposed to tax hikes.

According to the Harvard Family Research Project (2004), no current program can serve all the children who need it and what is required is to leverage public support to make preschool part of the formal public education system. However, at this politically fractured point in time, that is easier said than done. Another more realistic endeavor might be to listen to Kris Perry, Executive Director of the First Five Years Fund, who advocates working through a broad array of existing providers such as partnerships between community and school-based early learning programs and services, and to focus on the quality of the program.

A current model might be Educare, a Chicago-based non-profit that combines a variety of public and private funding streams. There are currently 18 Educare centers scattered across the country. They provide early intervention for educationally and socially at-risk youngsters with the goal that the children will start school on par with their middle class peers. Educare uses a birth-to-five approach for children in low-income communities. Its features are a comprehensive program in a single site, an outcome-based design with families an integral part of the services, and a blending of all available funding streams (Educare, 2003).

Each Educare school is anchored in the community it serves by a private funder. Through partnerships, the funder leverages the resources of local public schools, Head Start, Early Head Start and private shareholders. Head Start provides the core funding; the other sources support the enhancements. Educare's first center opened in 2000 in Chicago, and it already has some positive results for current 3rd graders as reported by Early Education and Development (2013). The study has found that 67% of the Chicago Educare's graduates were in the top 64% in reading and 74% in math. And fewer than half the students who received special services at Educare still need these services in elementary school.

In another hopeful sign, the investment bank Goldman Sachs, along with a Chicago venture capitalist, a Utah school district, and several community charities have recently entered into a partnership in which funds loaned from Goldman Sachs and the venture capital money will pay for expanding a preschool near Salt Lake City, Utah. The idea is that students who attend the preschool program are less likely to need remedial services or special education once they enter elementary school, thereby saving the school system money. Saving money will enable the school district to pay off the loans.

Having a market-driven approach—identifying the need, and combining private initiatives with federal, state, and local childcare financing—is a logical step at this point. Chicago has taken just this approach. Two years ago, Mayor Rahm Emanuel asked public schools, charter schools, religious schools, community-based groups, and Head Start centers to bid for public financing for preschool. If the preschool program is housed in a religious institution, religious education cannot take place. To qualify, preschools must follow approved guidelines and hire teachers with bachelor's degrees and early childhood certification. The goal is to foster competitiveness and then choose the best.

Conclusion

High quality preschool programs yield substantial returns to both the individual and society. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project's long running study has affirmed higher current earnings as well as reductions in criminal activities and in welfare costs. These gains are linked to the kinds of high quality preschool programs I have described in this article.

This supports the case for a wider public and private investment in the kind of early intervention programs that have proven successful with disadvantaged children. Following his widely cited and largely praised State of the Union speech, President Obama should continue to champion this goal, giving it his all politically, and accepting the fact that sweeping change is an uphill battle, urge the public to contact their legislators to take action.

Until now, large-scale success for high quality preschool for needy youngsters has been elusive. Given this reality, communities should mobilize the resources that are available. That means looking to programs that focus on high quality, continuity of care, blended funding, and partnering with public schools in the neighborhoods they serve. It means considering all possibilities from a birth-to-five full-day program to a part-day program that serves children beginning at age three.

Until our government decides to provide universal preschool beginning at three for children of poverty, disadvantaged communities must take the lead to harness all

available funding streams, both public and private, so that their youngsters can enter kindergarten on a par with children from higher social/economic backgrounds.

It is worth the cost to provide high quality early intervention through nationwide collaborations between the public and private sectors. Since educational and social deficits show up as early as nine months, placing disadvantaged children in high quality programs in their first year is a valuable antidote to later academic and social failure. However, because studies have shown that even children placed in a quality preschool by three do significantly better than those who are not, efforts should be made to provide high quality preschool programs for all disadvantaged children by at least age three.

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