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Free Early Childhood Development Programs:
Equaling the Playing Field

In an excerpt from Letters to the Next President, Lisa Delpit notes that underprivileged students “come to school with a different knowledge base than their middle-class...peers.” (Glickman, 72) Later in the same text, Jacqueline Jordan Irvine observes that “average scores for 17 year-old Black students in reading and math are about the same as the averages for 13 year-old White students.” (Glickman, 122) What is at the root of these discrepancies? If rich and poor and black and white students are raised in the same environment, how should socio-economics have an impact on either student’s ability to learn? A recent study may shed some light on this issue.

The study found that by the age of 4, a student from a poor family hears 30 million less words than a student from a professional household (Kirp, 4). Much of this astounding gap can be accredited to the disparities in Early Childhood Development programs. Another study found that “almost half of kindergarten teachers (46%) across the country report that at least half of their students have problems such as difficulty following directions and working independently and have a lack of academic skills when they enter kindergarten.” (*Investing*, 2) In order for children to be successful in

kindergarten, early childhood development is essential. The lack of universality of preschool education is largely due to a lack of funding.

“A year of good prekindergarten education costs about as much as a year of primary or secondary school”, so it’s easy to see that poor families are at a very distinct disadvantage (Kirp, 2). This is catastrophic, because as Lilian Katz writes, “those students who have the most to gain from good quality early childhood programs are from the families who can least afford to pay what they really cost.” (Glickman, 100) Early childhood development programs will benefit society as a whole; therefore, it is the government’s responsibility to provide these services for all students.

Early Childhood Development Programs Today

Currently only three states (Georgia, Oklahoma, and Florida) provide free universal prekindergarten. About 15 other states are working toward universal pre-K (Early, 1). Nearly 60% of American 3 and 4 year-olds attend some form of preschool, many in federal Head Start programs. Head Start is a \$6.8 Billion federal program for children from families below the poverty line. The program “delivers everything from know-your-letter drills and playground etiquette to hot meals and dental checkups.” (Kirp, 1) While Head Start is a great notion, the government still needs to do more. Only 45% of eligible families in Minnesota participate in the state’s Head Start program, and nationally, over 40 % still receive no prekindergarten training (Kirp, 1-2).

Why Early Childhood Development is Important

The effects of early childhood development don't disappear once a child enters kindergarten. In fact, the effects are incredibly wide ranging and can be grouped into five categories: 1) Educational benefits, 2) Personal benefits, 3) Parental benefits, 4) Social/Economic benefits, and 5) Biological benefits.

Educational benefits

- School Readiness Tests: Studies have shown that students who participate in early childhood development programs “gain seven to eight months in letter identification, six to seven months in spelling, and four months in applied problems.” (Gormley, 1)
- Achievement Gap: Students who entered Head Start behind their peers narrowed the gap during the Head Start year. Progress was especially notable in vocabulary knowledge, early writing skills, and recognition of numbers, letters, and words (Zill, 1). In addition, studies of Oklahoma's pre-K program showed that while all groups benefit from pre-K, African-American and Hispanic children gain the most (Gormley, 1).
- Learning Assessments: Studies of Perry Preschool in Michigan showed that program participants outperformed non-participants on various intelligence and language tests during early childhood, on school achievement tests from ages 9-14, and on literacy tests from age 19-27 (Schweinhart, 1). Georgia pre-K studies showed that ECD students outperformed their peers on 10 of 13 tests and skill ratings (Henry, 1).

Personal benefits

- Special Education: Studies have shown that participation in prekindergarten leads to a decrease in need for special education by about 40% (*Investing*, 1).
- Grade Retention: Students who attended prekindergarten were 40% less likely to have to repeat a grade (*Investing*, 1).
- High School Graduation: Students who receive pre-K education were 25-30% more likely to graduate high school. (Females were found to be upwards of 60% more likely to graduate.) (Schweinhart, 1 and Reynolds, 1)
- Drop Out Rate: Students were 15% less likely to drop out of high school if they participated in an ECD program (Reynolds, 1).
- Employment: At age 40, 76% of former prekindergarten students were employed, compared with 62% of the control group (Schweinhart, 1).
- Income: Adults with pre-K experience have a higher median income by over \$5,000 a year (Schweinhart, 1).
- Crime Rates: Participants have been shown to commit crimes at lower rates than non-participants (36% vs. 55% arrested 5 times or more). Fewer were arrested for violent crimes (32% vs. 48%), property crimes (36% vs. 58%), and drug crimes (14% vs. 34%) (Schweinhart, 1).
- Other benefits include increases in language skills, social skills, and home ownership and decreases in hyperactivity and other behavioral problems.

Parental benefits

Having reliable care arrangements for children allows workers to be more successful in the workplace by

- Reducing employee turnover.
- Reducing employee absenteeism.
- Increasing productivity (*Investing*, 1).

Social/Economical benefits

Studies done in the 1960's and 70's showed that for every dollar invested in early childhood development, there was a return of \$4-7 (Glickman, 101). Recent studies have concurred with this result. A study of Perry Preschool in Michigan showed that by the time a prekindergarten student turned 40, there would be a return of \$17 for every dollar spent on early childhood development (Schweinhart, 1). This study may be slightly skewed by inflation, but the impact is clear. Another recent study of Chicago's Child-Parent center returned \$7.10 for every dollar spent (Kirp, 5).

Overall, research has shown that early childhood development programs return between \$4-17 on every dollar spent. Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, economists from the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis found that "the annual *public* return to good ECD programs is 12 percent." (Rolnick, 2) This is 12 cents to the dollar, each year, in return directly to the public through an increase in worker productivity. This doesn't even take in to account all the factors discussed above.

Biological benefits

Recent research shows evidence that early childhood development yields biological benefits also. One such study found that “the human brain develops more rapidly between birth and age five than during any other subsequent period.” (*Investing*, 1) This research shows that investment in pre-K education is more valuable to a student than investment in K-12 education.

Essential Criteria for a Successful ECD

Around the country, there are countless federal and independent ECD programs with widely varying characteristics. Variables such as location of program, teacher experience, access to administrative personnel and teaching strategy exist across the spectrum of ECD programs in the United States. In order to create *quality* ECD programs for all children, it is necessary to define desirable characteristics and ensure that these characteristics are universally accepted and integrated. Some of these essential criteria include ensuring access to support staff, providing formal and ongoing teacher training, requiring high levels of teacher education, focusing on “at-risk” children, promoting parental involvement, forming heterogeneous classrooms, and using child-initiated learning.

Access to Support Staff

Because many preschool programs are not adequately staffed, existing programs are often ineffective. A recent study by Professor Walter S. Gilliam (Yale University)

showed that preschool students are expelled at a rate more than three times that of K-12 students. Gilliam's study also found that "the likelihood of expulsion decreases significantly with access to classroom-based behavioral consultation." (Gilliam, 1) Thus, Gilliam says that teachers must "have access to the support staff they need to effectively manage classroom behavior." (Gilliam, 2) It is an absolute necessity that students remain in their pre-K program for the duration of the school year, and therefore, it is essential to provide support staff to teachers in all ECD programs.

Teacher training

Gilliam also believes that "states should require teachers... to receive formal and ongoing training in how to manage behavior in young children." (Gilliam, 2) A study of the Georgia pre-K program showed that newer teachers teach higher quality classes, while older teachers "need additional training to improve their skills." (Henry, 1) K-12 teachers are required to complete teacher training programs and teachers of preschool students should be held to these same high standards.

Teacher education

In Oklahoma, one of the three states with Universal pre-K, preschool teachers are required to hold a Bachelor's degree. They are also paid on the same scale as a public school K-12 teacher. This allows Oklahoma's ECD programs to recruit and retain talented teachers, which plays a large role in the success of Oklahoma's ECD programs (Gormley, 1).

The Family and Child Experience Survey (FACES) is a random sample of Head Start programs. In 2000, FACES found that “teachers’ education levels were linked to greater gains in writings skills” and that “classrooms with higher levels of quality had teachers with higher levels of education, experience, and positive attitudes and knowledge about early childhood education practices.” (Zill, 2) This is another example where preschool teachers should be held to the same standards as K-12 teachers.

Focuses on “At-Risk” Children

According to Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, conditions that indicate whether a child is “at-risk” are low family income, violence or neglect in the home, low parent education levels, low birth weight, and parent chemical addiction (Rolnick, 2). It is crucial to reach these children above all others, because “children from economically advantaged families are likely to thrive without additional government resources [but] children from low-income families need additional support.” (Rolnick, 2)

“Tuition-plus” Scholarships

Rolnick and Grunewald also discuss the idea of tuition-plus scholarships. These scholarships “cover tuition for the at-risk child to a qualified ECD program plus the cost of high-quality parent mentoring and home visits.” (Rolnick, 3) The parent mentorship program is extremely important and begins before the child enters preschool. Mentors provide parents with information regarding financial, health and human services. Mentors also help parents select which ECD program is right for their child and educate parents about their role in the child’s early childhood education. “When parents receive

training in why and how to nurture their children's development, they're better able to nurture their children at home, outside of ECD program hours." (Rolnick, 2) Therefore, it is essential that support for ECD goes beyond funding for tuition alone.

Forms Heterogeneous Classrooms

A recent study by Saint Joseph's College found that low-income students in heterogeneous classrooms (less than 20% are low-income children) improved on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test at a rate of nearly eight times that of low-income students in homogeneous classrooms. Mid/upper-income students also thrived in heterogeneous settings. The study explained that lower-income students used mid/upper-income students as "language models" (St. Joseph's, 1).

Uses Child-Initiated Learning

It was clear to John Dewey just as it is clear today that "small children learn mainly from interacting not passively listening, understanding not memorizing, [and] reading for fun not simply decoding." (Kirp, 3) A 2004 study by Professor Arthur Reynolds (University of Wisconsin) reached this conclusion yet again. The study found that "children who were in preschool classrooms that emphasized child-initiated learning had higher eighth-grade reading scores and higher rates of high school graduation." (Kirp, 5) It is critical to encourage creativity and student interaction and give each student the freedom to explore.

Citizen Support for ECD Programs

Multiple recent studies have shown overwhelming citizen support for early childhood development programs. One study found that 87% of citizens support using public money to send every child to a top-notch preschool. Another found that over 65% favor investing in Universal pre-K before improving the existing K-12 system. Also, in 2002 in Florida, 59% of voters supported a state constitutional amendment requiring “high quality” pre-K for every student (Kirp, 2).

A recent workforce study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis asked business leaders to ponder the importance of an early childhood education. 55% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that “ensuring that all children are ready to learn by the time they reach kindergarten should be a high government priority.” 43% of respondents believed that the government should increase pre-K spending over the next decade (Madden, 1).

The Government’s Role in Remediating the Lack of ECD

Rolnick and Grunewald also note that “governments should only intervene in markets when they fail.” (Rolnick, 1) In economics, a positive externality is defined as a force outside of the market that causes an underproduction of the good. In the market for education, these societal benefits cause the externality. That is, the benefit to society is greater than the society’s demand. This causes an underproduction of the good. In other words, not enough education is being made available. The solution to a positive externality is for the government to impose a subsidy, because the market is failing. In this case, the government should subsidize education.

In their book, The American Dream and the Public Schools, Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick say that “the role of the government is to make success possible for everyone.” (Hochschild, 10) However, in today’s education system, it seems that the government is failing in this task. It is clear that participation in ECD programs has wide ranging effects that benefit not only the individual, but society as a whole. It is also evident that public support for ECD is on the rise. The movement for ECD for all is on the horizon, and now is the time for state and federal governments to take action. We must invest in the future of our country, and the best way of doing so is to invest in future generations. Providing preschool educations to all students will allow America to reach its full potential by equaling the playing field at a young age and giving each student the opportunity to reach his/her full potential.

Bibliography

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http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/3research_facts/05_ECE%20in%20Other%20States.pdf
- Gilliam, Walter S. *Prekindergarteners Left Behind: Expulsion Rates in State Prekindergarten Systems.* March, 2005.
http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/3research_summaries/Expulsion.pdf
- Glickman, Carl. *Letters to the Next President.* New York: Teachers College Press, 2004.
This is one of the assigned textbooks for the class. It is a series of letters from students, parents, teachers, administrators, etc. to the new president regarding the education system. It covers a wide range of topics including ECD and equity in schools (which is the overall goal of ECD).
- Gormley, William T., et al. *The Effects of Universal Pre-K on Cognitive Development.* Journal of Developmental Psychology, vol. 41, No. 6. 2005.
This is a research summary of a study conducted by the state of Oklahoma. Oklahoma is one of three states with Universal Pre-K, and this study tries to assess the outcomes of the program. The study found extensive information pointing toward the success of Oklahoma’s preschool program. I used this source to point out the importance of ECD programs.
- Henry, Gary T., et al. *Georgia’s Universal Pre-K Program Early Childhood Study 2001-2002.* August 2003.
http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/3research_summaries/05_GeorgiaPre-KEvaluation.pdf

This is a research summary of a study on Georgias's pre-K programs. Like Oklahoma, Georgia also offers Universal Pre-K. I used this study as a source of information about the effectiveness of ECD programs, as well as the importance of teacher training in preschool programs.

Hochschild, Jennifer and Scovronick, Nathan. *The American Dream and the Public Schools*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Investing in Early Education is Essential. Early Education for All.

http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/3research_facts/05_InvestEssential.pdf

This is a fact sheet compiled by the "Early Education for All" organization. The document includes a wide variety of arguments for ECD including biological, learning, economical and parental benefits. Much of my information for the importance of ECD programs came from this source.

Kirp, David L. *All My Children*. New York Times, July 31, 2005.

http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/5press_articles/0731_NYT_Allmychildren.htm

This is an article from the New York Times that was published on July 31, 2005. The article has a similar tone to that of my essay, and uses many of the same arguments. It also includes some information regarding criteria for a successful ECD program. This was probably the most useful of all of my sources as its purpose was very similar to mine.

Madden, Tobias and Cytron, Naomi. *Government's Role in Early Childhood Development*. Fedgazette, September 2003.

Reynolds, Arthur J., et al. *Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest*. The Journal of the American Medical Association, vol. 285, No. 18. May 9, 2002.

Rolnick, Art and Grunewald, Rob. *Early Childhood Development on a Large Scale*. The Region, June 2005.

This is an article published in The Region, a publication of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. The article approaches the issue of ECD from an economical perspective. The authors claim that society as a whole gains from investment in ECD, just as the participants do. I used this article as a basis for the "economic benefits" portion of my paper, and to describe the role of the government in providing ECD programs.

Schweinhart, L.J., et al. *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through age 40*. November 2004.

http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/3research_summaries/05_HighScope.pdf

This is a research summary based on a longitudinal study of participants in the Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan during the 1960's. The study found that by age 40, program participants had been more successful in their education, more successful in their careers, and far less likely to commit crimes. This source was extremely helpful in explaining the impacts of ECD, especially outside of school.

St. Joseph's College. *Language Growth in Low-Income Children in Economically Integrated Versus Segregated Preschool Programs*. 2002.

<http://ww2.sjc.edu/syc/PDF%20files/AERASchoolReadiness.pdf>

Zill, Nicholas, et al. *Head Start FACES 2000: A Whole-Child Perspective on Program Performance*. 2003.

http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/3research_summaries/05_HeadStartFaces2000.pdf