



Early education: Progress and promise for children from low-income families

Katherine Magnuson*, Hilary Shager

University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 10 March 2010

Keywords:

Early childhood education
Low-income families

ABSTRACT

It has become normative for children to attend some type of early education before entering kindergarten; yet, gaps in enrollment suggest that children from low-income families, who might benefit the most from such services, remain the least likely to receive them. The public sector engages in two main policy strategies to address this gap, providing compensatory preschool programs such as Head Start or state pre-kindergarten (pre-k), and means-tested child care assistance. Federal and state investments in both types of programs have increased dramatically over the past two decades; however, still only a portion of eligible poor children are served. Evidence from the evaluation literature suggests that high quality early education improves low-income children's school readiness and other long-term developmental outcomes. States face considerable challenges in ensuring that children have access to quality early care and education experiences.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

It has become normative for children to attend some type of early education before entering kindergarten. This reflects both a greater attention to learning in the early years, as well as mothers' increased participation in the formal labor market (Magnuson, Meyers, & Waldfogel, 2007). For decades, scholars, policy-makers, and advocates have touted the potential of early education to remediate disadvantaged children's low levels of achievement at school entry, and, indeed, the potential payoff from attending early education programs, particularly for children from low-income families, may be quite large. High quality programs have demonstrated impressive positive effects on poor children's school readiness and later life success, yet challenges regarding access to such programs, as well as defining and maintaining high quality remain. How much progress has been made?

2. Early gaps in learning and the role of early education

It is widely recognized that children begin learning long before they enter school and that development proceeds at an astonishingly rapid rate during the first few years of life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron, & Shonkoff, 2006). Neuroscience research has documented how complex cognitive capacities are built on earlier foundational skills, and strongly shaped by interactions with caregivers and environments (Knudsen et al., 2006). Psychologists often refer to the early years as a "sensitive" period for a child's cognitive and socioemotional development, in recognition of

the fact that some skills are most easily acquired during this time (Nelson, 2000).

Unfortunately, it is also well known that children enter school with varying levels of preparation for learning. What constitutes school readiness is often itself a topic for discussion. Most researchers, teachers, and parents alike point to both pre-academic skills, such as recognizing letters and numbers, as well as behavioral skills, such as sitting still and following directions. Children from low-income families as well as ethnic and racial minority groups, on average, have lower levels of such skills than other children. For example, data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), a cohort of children who entered kindergarten in 1998, finds that on average, compared with non-poor children, poor children score 0.65 of a standard deviation lower on a test of early reading and 0.72 of a standard deviation lower on a test measuring early math skills (calculations by authors). Given that most children learn about a standard deviation worth of skills in their first year of school, this translates into poor children starting school about six months behind their more advantaged peers. Black and Hispanic children also perform less well on these tests than white children (0.40 and 0.45, respectively, for reading and 0.61 and 0.71, respectively, for math). In contrast, children of Asian descent appear to perform as well as or better than white children (Magnuson & Duncan, 2005).

The fact that children from disadvantaged backgrounds enter school less prepared than their more advantaged peers might not be so troublesome, if they quickly made up the ground. Yet, we know that early differences in pre-academic skills and behavior foreshadow later inequality across a range of outcomes. Early academic disparities persist or are even exacerbated during the early school years, and ultimately culminate in important differences in rates of high school

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: kmagnuson@wisc.edu (K. Magnuson).

graduation and later employment. For example, about 21% of young adults from low-income families do not complete high school compared with just 4% of those from wealthy families (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

One of the primary explanations for these early achievement disparities between more and less advantaged children is the difference in the quality of environments, particularly family environments, which young children experience during this time of rapid development. As described by Morris and Gennetian (this issue), parents with higher levels of education and financial resources are better able to provide the types of learning environments that facilitate the development of academic skills, and they are able to be more responsive to their children's social and emotional needs. More highly educated parents are more likely to provide their children home learning environments that support academic success; for example, by providing rich language and literacy environments, and engaging children in learning activities (Davis-Kean, 2005; Raviv, Kessenich, & Morrison, 2004). Parents with more money are able to buy a larger range of goods and services for their families, such as health care, nutrition, and enriching activities, both in the home and outside the home (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). Finally, the inability to meet household and other basic expenses may cause some poor parents to feel frustrated, helpless, and depressed (Conger et al., 2002; McLoyd, 1998). This distress may, in turn, lead to less responsive and more harsh and punitive parenting. Taken together, the multiple disadvantages poor children face are considerable (Evans, 2004; Magnuson & Votruba-Drzal, 2009). Thus, the promise of early education to remediate disadvantaged children's achievement rests on its ability to provide enriching social and academic environments that compensate for the range of disadvantages that low-income children face.

Increasingly, researchers and parents alike recognize that there is no meaningful distinction between caring for a child and educating a child (Adams & Rohacek, 2002). An array of early care and education (ECE) programs, encompassing all forms of informal and formal non-parental care arrangements are available in most communities. Informal care is often provided by nannies, neighbors, and relatives, typically in home-based settings, whereas formal care may be provided by schools as well as for-profit and non-profit early education or child care providers, in center or group-based settings. We use the term early education program and preschool interchangeably to denote a subset of ECE programs, center-based child care programs with an educational focus. Although, presumably, early education programs differ from center-based child care, in the extent to which early learning is emphasized and perhaps in hours of operation, the distinction between these types of programs is becoming increasingly blurred. Many center-based child care programs and early education programs now address the dual goals of supporting working families and providing enriching learning environments. Early education programs often offer extended hours of wrap-around care, and child care centers use early learning curricula (Adams & Rohacek, 2002). We focus most of our discussion specifically on early education programs; however, we also recognize that these programs are part of a broader ECE system, and thus also provide some discussion, albeit brief, of issues relevant to other forms of ECE.

For parents, decisions about early education are part of a more general process of determining non-parental care arrangements. One particularly influential factor for most families' decisions about ECE arrangements is cost. Without public support, the high cost of full-time private preschool or center-based care makes such arrangements prohibitively expensive for many low-income families, for whom such costs may often represent as much as a quarter of their total household income (Blank, Schulman, & Ewen, 1999; Rosenbaum & Ruhm, 2005). The high price of center-based child care depresses both maternal employment and the use of this type of care, particularly among low-income, low-skilled, and single mothers (Anderson &

Levine, 2000; Blau, 2001; Hofferth & Wissoker, 1992). With the costs of private early education programs equally high and availability of publicly funded early education programs limited, many low-income parents may be priced out of such programs (Smolensky & Gootman, 2003).

3. Early education enrollment trends over time

Despite the high costs of care, trends in enrollment among three- to five-year-olds have been steadily increasing over the past 50 years; however, income disparities in enrollment rates have been stubbornly persistent. The October Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS) provides the only data available to measure long-term trends in enrollment patterns for preschoolers. Fig. 1 presents preschool enrollment trends from the CPS for three- and four-year-olds by income quartile. The most striking pattern of the figure is the large and largely persistent gap in preschool enrollment by family income. Children in families with incomes in the bottom half of the income distribution have enrollments that are nearly 20 percentage points lower than those in the highest quarter. Also notable, is that although enrollments have increased over time, there have been two distinct periods of growth—the first during the 1970s and the later during the 1990s. In both cases, such growth was apparent across the income distribution. Although increases in maternal employment are likely implicated, the underlying causes for the trends have not been carefully studied.

Fig. 2 presents trends in preschool enrollment for racial and ethnic groups. These data suggest that both black and white children are enrolled at similar rates. However, children of Hispanic origin have considerably lower enrollment rates than their non-Hispanic peers, with the gap amounting to over 15 percentage points. Moreover, the gap seemed to converge some during the 1980s, but widened during the 1990s. It is important to note that demographic shifts in the Hispanic population might underlie these trends. Children of immigrants are less likely to attend preschool and center-based care than their native-born peers (Brandon, 2004). Magnuson, Lahaie and Waldfogel (2006) found that only 58% of children of immigrants had experienced preschool in the year before kindergarten, whereas 73% of children of US-born parents had done so.

Data from the National Household Education Survey (NHES) provide another source of recent information about preschool attendance. These data suggest that in 2005 about 57% of 3- to 5-year-olds were in some type of center-based early education or child care program (including Head Start). As expected, the rates are higher for 4- and 5-year-olds (about 69%) than for 3-year-olds (42%). As in

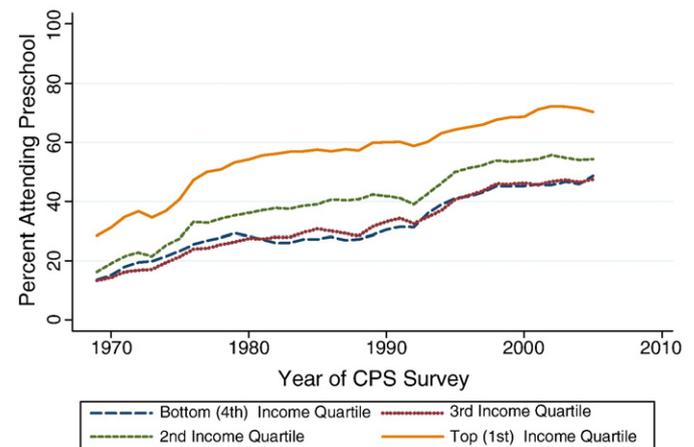


Fig. 1. Percent of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in preschool, by family income quartile, 1968–2006. Notes: Authors' calculation of the October CPS data for three- and four-year old children.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات