

Session III. The Equity Effects of Good Preschools: What Do We Know?

Can a quality preschool experience help to close the achievement gap that plagues our society? This question has been a subject of contention between researchers and policymakers for over three decades. Indeed, unlike many other industrial nations, which support a universal system of early childhood care and education, the U.S. national commitment to the wellbeing of very young children has been expressed primarily through the funding of compensatory care and education. Certainly in terms of federal expenditures, Head Start and Title I – both designed to serve the needs of disadvantaged youngsters – represent the vast bulk of early childhood allocations. How effective are these programs? Is there a way to make them more effective and/or to design a universal system for the U.S. that would accelerate the achievement of disadvantaged youth?

Background

According to the Children's Defense Fund, more than 9 million American children have four or more risk factors that have been linked to school failure – including families who live in poverty, parents who lack a high school education, households where no adult has full-time employment, being raised by a single parent, being raised in a family on welfare, and/or a lack of health care coverage. To this list should be added children whose first language is other than English and the children of racial and ethnic minorities – particularly African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans – most, but not all, of which can be explained by the fact that immigrants and minorities represent a disproportionate number of those in poverty.

How are these disadvantages expressed in terms of educational attainment? While this is difficult to quantify, recent research helps suggest several areas of concern. For example, a recent report by the National Research Council, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, indicates that at-risk children may begin school at a significant disadvantage in terms of language and literacy development. This includes lack of alphabetic knowledge, lack of vocabulary, and lack of the background knowledge necessary for future reading comprehension. Without intervention, it is a gap that only grows over time. For instance, one study found that, on average, by age 3, the children of welfare families averaged half the vocabulary words known by the children of college-educated parents. By grade 1, the children of welfare families knew only one-fourth as many words as their more advantaged peers.

In general, there are two ways for social policy to affect educational outcomes for disadvantaged preschool-age children: the first is to improve the social and economic condition of their families; the second is to use a preschool or daycare setting to compensate for these conditions. While the first option would be more direct, and many would argue more effective and long lasting, it is also more difficult and unlikely. Thus, the first question is: How do we use the national consensus in favor of equal educational opportunity to help children begin school on a more equal footing.

Head Start is the major funding mechanism by which the nation supports the education of disadvantaged preschoolers. So the second question becomes: How effective is Head Start and how do we make it and similar programs more effective?

A recent review of the research on preschool effects by Steven Barnett points to serious methodological problems in the design of most Head Start evaluations which limit the conclusions that can be drawn at this time. Although the test score differences attributable to Head Start appear small and may fade over time, there appear to be more robust effects on rates of grade retention, special education placement, and high school graduation. It should be noted, as well, that Head Start was designed primarily as a social, not an educational, intervention program – meaning that some of the recent criticisms of the program for lack of educational results are probably unfair. Most Head Start programs do not emphasize the teaching of educational skills and content, and few staff members are trained to do so.

Nevertheless, Barnett's research review and other recent studies suggest that well-designed, cognitively oriented preschool programs may be able to boost the achievement of disadvantaged students significantly – and that the design and staffing of Head Start and other compensatory preschool programs should be rethought in light of this data. The long-term findings of the Abecedarian study in North Carolina are particularly compelling, with poor, African-American students who received a quality preschool education and early school intervention (through grade 2) testing at or near the national average into high school. (The careful, randomized design of this experimental study is also worthy of note.)

In this regard, what, if anything, does the French experience have to tell us? According to data from various sources (OECD, UN, TIMSS, press reports), there are surprisingly strong parallels between the two nations. While France is a relatively homogenous society by U.S. standards, it is fairly diverse in the European context. Indeed, although France keeps no official national statistics on race and religion (its policies on the equality of citizens holds such distinctions to be meaningless), it is estimated that over 13 percent of the population are immigrants or the children of immigrants. With an estimated 4 million adherents, Islam is now France's second religion (after Catholicism), with over twice as many adherents as all Protestant and Jewish sects combined. The 1988 official foreign population rate of 6.8 percent is not hugely dissimilar to the official U.S. rate of 7.9 percent. The rate of children born to single-parent households is actually higher in France (33.2 percent vs. 30.1 in the U.S.). So is the unemployment rate (9.3 percent in France vs. 3.9 percent in the U.S. as of October 2000). The school year is similar (174 days in France, 178 in the U.S.), as is the percentage of GDP spent on primary and secondary education (3.4 percent in France, 3.5 percent in the U.S.). Perhaps most interestingly, the unregulated rate of children born into poverty (not counting the effects of social programs) is also very similar, estimated at 25 percent in France and 26 percent in the U.S. With social spending taken into account, the U.S. child poverty rate drops marginally (to 21.5 percent) while the French rate plummets to roughly 7 percent. (In other words, the French social safety net is much more comprehensive and effective in bettering the lives of poor children.)

Despite these similarities, vast differences in the educational, social, cultural, and economic circumstances of each nation make it difficult to make meaningful comparisons. Nevertheless, France's performance on the eighth-grade math portion of the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) drew considerable attention from U.S. educators. This was due not so much to France's higher standing in the horserace reporting of the overall results, but to the fact that the French academic achievement gap – between rich and poor, immigrant and native born, minority and non-minority – was remarkably small in comparison to current and historical U.S. trends. While there is no firm data to suggest why this was so, there has been much speculation as to the effect of France's *ecole maternelle* – free, cognitively-oriented preschool available to all French students from the age of 2, and attended almost universally by age 3.

Information Gathered for this Session

The materials in this section provide background for the further exploration of the issues outlined above. They include:

- Data on a range of Head Start effects, including recent findings on the results of Early Head Start, providing intervention to students at an earlier age.
- A draft paper on recent longitudinal findings from the Abecedarian study reports on student outcomes up until the age of 21.
- Excerpts from a report by the Children's Defense Fund that looks at the high cost of quality preschool in the U.S. and discusses the ramifications of lack of affordability for poor families.
- Materials on the achievement effects of the *ecole maternelle* which show a dramatic decline in the rate of student retention (from over 30 percent for students with no preschool attendance down to 10 percent for those who spent three or more years in preschool) as well as test score increases in evaluations of cognitive skill and academic performance.
- An overview of early childhood education and care policies in all of the OECD countries, including the U.S. and France.

Readings

Session III: The Equity Effects of Good Pre-School: What Do We Know

Summary

Background Memo, Albert Shanker Institute Staff

Other Materials

“The Development of Cognitive and Academic Abilities: Growth Curves from an Early Childhood Educational Experiment-Draft,” (discussion of Abecedarian Study)

“Early Childhood Education and Care: An Overview of Developments in the OECD Countries,” by Sheila B. Kamerman, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 2000.

Early Learning, Later Success: The Abecedarian Study, Early Childhood Educational Intervention, 1999. (in pocket)

“Equity Effects of Very Early Schooling in France,” Translation of Jarrouse/ Mingat research by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., March 1998.

Faces Findings: New Research on Head Start Program Quality and Outcomes, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 2000. (in pocket)

“The High Cost of Child Care Puts Quality Care Out of Reach for Many Families,” by Karen Schulman, Children’s Defense Fund, 2000.

“Long Run Pedagogic Effects of School Enrollment for Two Year Olds,” translated excerpt from “L’ école maternelle en France: normes éducatives et socialisation après la Seconde Guerre mondiale” by Eric Plaisance, *Recherches et Prévisions*, N° 57/58, 1999.

“Preschool and Elementary School” charts, translated data from *L’Etat l’Ecole*, N° 10, Ministry of National Education, 2000.

