



Parents' persistence and certification in a two-generation education and training program



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ABSTRACT

Two-generation programs provide education and training services for parents while their children attend early childhood education programs. This study examines the rates of persistence and certification of parents in one of the only two-generation interventions in the country under study, CareerAdvance®, which offers training in the healthcare sector to parents while their children attend Head Start ($n = 92$). Results indicate that 16 months after enrolling in CareerAdvance®, 76% of participants attained at least one workforce-applicable certificate of the program and 59% were still in the program. The majority of parents who left the program during the 16 months had attained a certificate (68%). Parents with high levels of material hardship were more likely to attain a certificate and stay enrolled in the program, and parents with higher levels of psychological distress were less likely to attain a certificate in the same time period. Implications for future two-generation programming are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Low-income parents with young children in the United States have markedly low levels of education. Over half of parents with children under three in the bottom 40% of the income distribution have no more than a high school degree (Addy, Engelhardt, & Skinner, 2013). As a result, many low-income parents struggle to meet the demands of the 21st century global economy as technological innovation increasingly requires advanced degrees to attain a family-supporting wage (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014). In addition, the proportion of children living in low-income families is high, with almost half of all children in the United States living in low-income households in 2013, and upward mobility is increasingly elusive (Addy et al., 2013; DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014; Wight, Chau, & Aratani, 2010; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). In this context, policymakers are

seeking new approaches to support parents' educational advancement and wage growth, and to promote well-being across generations.

Two-generation approaches—serving parents and children together—represent a promising and innovative antipoverty strategy to support both parents' and children's education. These programs intentionally and strategically link intensive, high-quality education, job training, and career-building programs for low-income parents *simultaneously* with early childhood education for their young children (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014). The design of two-generation programs is based on an innovative proposal that early childhood education programs may offer an ideal context for recruiting parents into postsecondary education and training and promoting their educational success over time (Brooks-Gunn, Berlin, & Fuligni, 2000; Sommer et al., 2012).

Low-income parents raising young children face significant barriers to advancing their educational attainment, including financial costs, inadequate support from family and friends, lack of access to quality child care, poor preparation for the postsecondary environment, and challenges in balancing work, family and school demands (Gardner, Brooks-Gunn, & Chase-Lansdale, 2015). Two-generation programs attempt to address these barriers by providing short-term, yet intensive, education and training programs with multiple supportive services, including incentives, coaching support, and peer partner meetings, to

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produce long-term educational gains for parents (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014).

Because many of these programs are still in their nascent stages, little is known about whether they indeed help parents attain advanced certificates that are likely to expand their labor market options. In the current study, we examine parents' educational success in CareerAdvance®, one of the only fully-operating two-generation programs in the country under extensive study. CareerAdvance®, launched in 2008 by the Community Action Project (CAP) of Tulsa County, combines Head Start services with education and stackable training in the healthcare sector. CareerAdvance® also provides a number of supports for parents, including peer partner meetings with coaches, incentives for performance, and in-kind assistance, to help parents meet their educational goals. The goal of this study is to examine the rates of persistence (i.e., whether the parent is enrolled at the end of 16 months) and certification of parents in CareerAdvance®, the extent to which parents participate in the supportive services of the program that were designed to promote persistence and certification, and the factors that predict parents' success after the first 16 months, with a particular emphasis on parents' financial circumstances and psychological wellbeing.

1.1. Past evidence on education and training programs for parents

In the current study, parents' educational progress, certification, and training are the main outcomes of interest due to the importance for both parent and child wellbeing. Parents' level of education is one of the most consistent correlates of children's academic achievement and later economic mobility (Davis-Kean, 2005; Sastry & Pebley, 2012). Even a one-year increase in low-income parents' education, regardless of where they start, can help increase cognitive stimulation in the home environment (Magnuson, 2007). Moreover, parents' educational advancement can help improve children's own learning and development (Gennetian, Magnuson, & Morris, 2008).

Encouragingly, over the past several decades, the number of parents pursuing postsecondary education has grown, with the proportion of undergraduates who are parents rising from 20 to 27% (Horn & Carroll, 1996; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2002). However, the majority of these parents are unable to attain an advanced certificate or degree through traditional two- or four-year institutions, often due to the competing demands from work, school, and family and the limited supports and services available at these institutions to address parents' needs (Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2005). Parents with children are 25% more likely to leave school without a degree compared to non-parent students (Nelson, Froehner, & Gault, 2013). Often, low-income mothers may exit school without a credential or degree to attain a job to support their families in the short-term; yet, many hold onto their long-term hopes of earning a degree at some later point (Edin & Keflas, 2005).

Past interventions designed explicitly to improve parents' education and job training have had limited success. In the 1980s and 1990s, several programs—including the New Chance Demonstration, Learning Earning and Parenting Program (LEAP), and Teenage Parent Demonstration (TDP)—were created in response to concerns that too many teenagers were becoming parents and going on welfare. These programs provided a range of services to help parents complete their GED, including basic academic skills instruction and occupational skills training as well as family planning classes and parenting workshops. Experimental studies demonstrated limited success in helping parents advance their education, with often few differences in parents' GED attainment between treatment and control groups (Granger & Cytron, 1999).

Importantly, parent participants in previous education and training interventions often cite child care as a barrier for their education and work activities. In the more recent Louisiana Scholarship Program, a performance-based scholarship program that provided incentives and enhanced student services to low-income parents, participants

frequently discussed the challenge of balancing work and child care while going to school (Richburg-Hayes et al., 2009). In fact, almost half of all parents in the Louisiana Scholarship study reported that they used the incentives provided by the program to pay for child care costs, suggesting the challenges of meeting the multiple needs of parents with young children (Richburg-Hayes et al., 2009).

1.2. Supporting parents' persistence and educational advancement through a two-generation program

Two-generation programs are gaining momentum across the country as a way to support parents' and children's education together. Instead of viewing child care as a barrier, two-generation programs capitalize on early childhood education programs as an opportunity to attract parents into education and training programs given that parents may view the program as a safe and trusting environment (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2013; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; King, Chase-Lansdale, & Small, 2015). In addition, early childhood education programs may promote social capital as parents and children interact regularly and become familiar with one another, program leadership, family support staff, children's teachers, and home visitors (Small, 2009). These social ties could provide important informational resources and help promote success among parents as they work together to improve their education. On the day-to-day, as parents experience their young children thriving and learning in early education settings, they may be more motivated to improve their own education and career opportunities and see the connections between their own educational success and that of their children (Sommer et al., 2012). Thus, offering education and career training to parents within early education programs may be more effective than similar adult-oriented services that are unconnected to children's early learning programs.

There is little evidence on the influence of two-generation programs on parent and child outcomes. However, some evidence does suggest that Head Start, the nation's largest federal preschool program, as a whole may help promote parent education (Love, Chazan-Cohen, Raikes, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013). New findings from the Head Start Impact Study reveal that parents whose children were randomly assigned to Head Start were more likely to increase their own educational attainment over time than did parents of control group children, particularly among parents at the postsecondary level (Sabol & Chase-Lansdale, 2015). Formalizing an education and career training program within early childhood education programs could build upon this momentum.

1.3. Key elements of CareerAdvance®: a two-generation program in Tulsa, OK

In 2008, the Community Action Project (CAP) of Tulsa County, a comprehensive antipoverty agency, sought to strengthen its education and training for parents building off their effective Head Start programs (Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005). CareerAdvance® was developed based on evidence from the workforce development literature regarding the key elements to help support adult educational advancement (King, 2014). In particular, CareerAdvance® offers sectoral-based training in the healthcare field to help parents attain certificates that can help in the labor market (Maguire, Freely, Clymer, Conway, & Schwartz, 2010). The intervention offers a sequence of healthcare tracks—nursing, health information technology, and medical assisting—in partnership with community colleges designed so that participants can make concrete progress, exit at various points with certificates, but then return for future advancement. This stackable training may be particularly important for parents, who are more likely to participate in postsecondary education in a discontinuous or slower fashion. In response to this idea, CareerAdvance® was designed so that parents have the option to exit the program at several different points along the career ladder and still advance their career (Astone, Schoen, Ensminger, & Rothert, 2000; Magnuson, 2007).

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