



# Kindergarten readiness for low-income and ethnically diverse children attending publicly funded preschool programs in Miami



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## ABSTRACT

Using data from the Miami School Readiness Project (MSRP), we examine the kindergarten readiness of five cohorts (2002–2007) of children from low-income, ethnically, and linguistically diverse families ( $n = 16,176$ ) in Miami, Florida who experienced three types of publicly funded preschool programs the year before kindergarten: public school-based pre-K, center-based care, or family childcare. Black and Latino children in public school-based pre-K programs consistently demonstrated greater kindergarten readiness when compared with their classmates in center-based and family childcare, controlling for demographic variables and cognitive skills at preschool entry. In most cases, low-income children enrolled in center-based care also exhibited greater kindergarten skills than their classmates who had attended family childcare. Results were the same across ethnic and language groups. Thus, for all groups of children, those who attended public school-based pre-K began kindergarten with a stronger start than their classmates who attended center-based care and family childcare, and they continued to do better at the end of the kindergarten year.

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## 1. Introduction

There has been growing interest in early childhood programs that promote low-income and ethnically diverse children's school success from an early age, a period that has greater returns on investment than later years (Heckman, 2008). Although parents remain the most important shepherds of children's school success (Belsky et al., 2007), early education programs have received increased political interest, in part, because they are more policy amenable. Today, roughly 53% of children across the country experience some form of regular part- or full-day pre-kindergarten, center-based care, or preschool program during the two years leading up to kindergarten, yet participation among some minority groups remains low, with 56% of Latino children not attending pre-kindergarten or preschool as compared with 43–44% of non-Latino White and Black children (Child Trends, 2014). Even children who attend preschool have experiences that differ dramatically because preschool programs come in many forms including: (1) public school-based pre-K programs (pre-K), which are sponsored

by school districts and housed within public schools targeting all children (universal) or children in poverty (targeted); (2) center-based care, which are licensed or license-exempt programs that are either for- or non-profit institutions spanning across local, individual, and national chains; and (3) family childcare, licensed or not, which encompasses non-relative care housed in a caregiver's home.

Whether different types of publicly funded programs have benefits for children through the transition into kindergarten and beyond remains in question (Hill, Gormley, & Adelstein, 2015; Lipsey, Farran, & Hofer, 2015; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007a; Puma et al., 2010). Considering the rapidly evolving preschool market, and the large public investment in children's education, we need to know which types of publicly funded programs are most effective at preparing children for school. In particular, the large gaps in the academic skills of minority children as compared with White children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011a, 2011b) necessitate a focus on their experiences early in the life course when development is more malleable (Heckman, 2008).

To address these gaps in knowledge, we use a subsample of low-income and ethnically diverse children from the Miami School Readiness Project (MSRP) to report on their early experiences in several different types of publicly funded programs in Miami-Dade County, between 2002 and 2007. In addressing these objectives,

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we add to the extant literature in a few important ways. Primarily, we focus on the experiences of low-income and ethnically diverse children through kindergarten, which has been lacking in the extant literature. Moreover, prior studies have often grouped pre-K and center-based care into one larger category of 'preschool' (Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004; Magnuson et al., 2007a), thereby, inhibiting our understanding of the efficacy of different forms of preschool. Third, although family childcare serves a large number of low-income families (Morrissey & Banghart, 2007), such programs have received little empirical attention.

Finally, in addressing our research objectives, we link administrative data sources—data that are collected for administrative and not specifically research purposes—with survey data and direct child assessments. Although administrative data have been largely absent from the existing literature on early care and education programs, these comprehensive systems of information are often collected as part of day-to-day operations for different agencies and can serve as a valuable resource in addressing policy-relevant research questions (for an example of prior studies that have used administrative data see, Fantuzzo, Leboeuf, Rouse, & Chen, 2012). To illustrate the potential of working with administrative data, we couple direct assessments and survey data of children's preschool experiences with administrative data that capture children's kindergarten readiness. When taken together, this study has the potential to inform the discourse on where state and federal financial resources should be allocated and, just as importantly, illustrate the advantages and disadvantages in using administrative data when studying the benefits of different types of early childhood programs.

### 1.1. Public school-based pre-K programs

Over the last decade, the enrollment of 4-year-old children in state-funded pre-K programs (a large share of which occur in public schools) across the country has increased such that today, 29% of children nationwide attend pre-K programs at age 4 (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, Clarke Brown, & Horowitz, 2015). Although 80% of children in Florida are served by state-funded pre-K, the quality of these programs is poor when compared with other state programs (Barnett et al., 2015). For example, across the U.S., four in ten children experience pre-K programs that meet fewer than 50% of quality standards (e.g., teacher has BA; specialized training in pre-K; child teacher ratio 10:1; assistant teacher with a CDA or equivalent; Barnett et al., 2015). Florida's programs, however, rank in the bottom 10% of states with regard to per-child expenditures (\$2238 vs. national averages of \$4679) and have only met 30% of quality benchmarks. With millions of dollars at stake, there has been growing interest in better understanding how large-scale pre-K programs compare with other publicly funded non-school based centers.

Because pre-K programs are generally housed in public schools, they tend to have more rigorous standards, better teacher education and pay, offer a higher quality experience, and are more likely to have academically oriented curriculum than other childcare arrangements (Barnett et al., 2015; Winsler et al., 2008), each of which has important implications for children's educational prospects (Clarke-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005). Consequently, pre-K programs are likely to produce better school readiness outcomes when compared with center-based and family childcare programs because they are, in general, of higher quality and better regulated. In fact, there is growing evidence to suggest that children enrolled in pre-K exhibit the greatest gains across areas of school readiness (Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007b; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013; Winsler et al., 2008) when compared with children in center-based programs or those who have yet to attend pre-K. Children attending

public school pre-K also demonstrate reduced odds of repeating kindergarten (Winsler et al., 2012) and, at least among Black males, are more likely to be identified as gifted later during elementary school (Winsler, Gupta, Kim, & Levitt, 2013). Pre-K attendees can also exhibit sustained benefits through the transition to school (Bassok, French, Fuller, & Kagan, 2016; Forry, Davis, & Welti, 2013; Magnuson et al., 2004, 2007a).

### 1.2. Subsidized care: center-based care and family childcare

Alternatively, there are subsidized community-based programs (center-based and family childcare), which serve the majority of low-income children (Johnson & Ryan, 2015). During the 2012 fiscal year, roughly \$8.6 billion was spent on child care subsidies for roughly 1.5 million low-income families each month (\$4679 dollars per child; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014a, 2014b). The primary source of childcare assistance for low-income families has been funding through the Child Care and Development Fund, whereby the federal government and individual states provide subsidies to eligible, low-income, working parents or parents attending school full time. In Florida, eligibility is capped at 150% of the poverty line (Schulman & Blank, 2011) with nine in ten (91%) parents using their subsidies for center-based care and only one in ten (9%) enrolling their children in family childcare (Administration for Children and Families, 2010). Although these programs serve the majority of subsidy-eligible families, we know little about them because most of the literature has examined childcare usage among more affluent populations. We do know, however, that family childcare programs accessible to low-income families are generally of lower quality than center-based care and public school pre-K (Dowsett, Huston, Imes, & Gennetian, 2008; Votruba-Drzal, Coley, & Chase-Lansdale, 2004).

Studies that focus on center-based care have found that children demonstrate gains in school readiness, albeit to a lower degree when compared with children in public school-based pre-K through the end of preschool (Forry et al., 2013; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004; Magnuson et al., 2007a, 2007b; Winsler et al., 2008). In contrast, children who attend family childcare have been found to exhibit larger disparities in school readiness throughout preschool than children enrolled in center-based care and pre-K (Bumgarner & Brooks-Gunn, 2015; Forry et al., 2013; Loeb et al., 2004).

Three studies that examined children's childcare arrangements in the same community as the present investigation are of note and discussed below. Primarily, Winsler et al. (2008) found that low-income children in Miami Dade County exhibited gains in areas of early academic learning when enrolled in public school-based pre-K and center-based care (family childcare programs were not examined in this study). Building on this work, Ansari and Winsler conducted two follow-up studies and found that: (a) Latino children in family childcare demonstrated fewer school readiness gains throughout the preschool year than their peers in center-based care (Black children and children in pre-K were not examined in this study; Ansari & Winsler, 2012); and (b) among a subsample of the MSRP, low-income children who experienced stable center-based care at ages 3 and 4 made moderate gains in school readiness as compared with children who experienced two years of family childcare, but the small number of children who switched from subsidized care to public school-based pre-K demonstrated the strongest test scores in preschool (Ansari & Winsler, 2013).

None of these authors, however, examined whether these benefits were sustained through the kindergarten year nor did they examine the larger group of children attending public school-based pre-K programs across all five cohorts of the MSRP. Such information is necessary, however, as prior research suggests that the effects of preschool can fade as early as kindergarten (Bloom &

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