Reforming Preschools and Schools

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Abstract

Compared with their higher-income counterparts, children growing up in low-income families in the United States typically complete less schooling, report worse health, and work and earn less in adulthood. Moreover, changes in the American economy over the last 40 years have raised the level of skills and qualifications that children need to obtain a good middle-class job, as well as making it much more difficult for children from low-income families to attend schools that support their learning of these skills. We first review strategies used in the past to improve K–12 schooling—including investing more money, introducing more accountability, and putting in place new governance structures (eg, charter schools)—and show why these strategies have been relatively ineffective. Drawing on the research literature and case studies, we then describe education reform strategies for prekindergarten programs and for elementary, middle, and high schools that may help meet these challenges. All of the initiatives described in our case studies provide ample opportunities for teachers and school leaders to improve their skills through coaching and other professional development activities; incorporate sensible systems of accountability, including requiring teachers to open their classrooms to the scrutiny of colleagues and school leaders and to work with their colleagues to improve their teaching practices; and incorporate high academic standards, such as those described in the Common Core State Standards. By focusing directly on improving teaching and promoting learning, these successful initiatives have boosted the achievement of low-income children. They show that it is indeed possible to make a real difference in the life chances of low-income children.

Keywords: education policy; educational outcomes; inequality; preschool

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Children from low-income families begin school well behind those born to more affluent parents, and they fail to gain ground during the school years (Fig. 1).[1] Moreover, adults who were poor as children complete 2 fewer years of schooling, earn less than half as much, work far fewer hours per year, receive more in food stamps, and are nearly 3 times as likely to report poor overall health relative to adults whose families had incomes of at least twice the poverty line during their early childhood.[2] These adult outcomes are in turn associated with worse educational and health outcomes for the children born to these adults, which risks perpetuating a vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty and poor health.

This article focuses on education-based approaches to improving the life chances of poor children. While the family and other out-of-school contexts obviously play a major role in shaping child and youth development, completed schooling has repeatedly been shown to be a major determinant of adult attainment and health.[3,4] During the first three-quarters of the 20th century, American schools did a quite good job of providing many groups of children from low-income families with the skills and educational attainments needed to earn a decent living.[5] Over the last 40 years, computer-driven technological changes have drastically changed the labor market, eliminating a great many of the middle-class jobs held by previous generations of high school graduates and replacing them with jobs that require greater skills and training.[6] This has widened the pay gap between high school- and college-educated workers and the income gap between high- and low-income families. Indeed, despite ongoing economic growth, poverty among US children has remained stubbornly high.

Causes and Consequences of Increasing Income Inequality

By requiring higher skills for hundreds of middle-class occupations, technological change is increasing demands on the nation's educational system. At the same time, increased income inequality has affected parents' ability to invest in their children. While high-income families have far more resources to support large investments in their children's learning, low-income parents have fewer resources to devote to their children.[7]

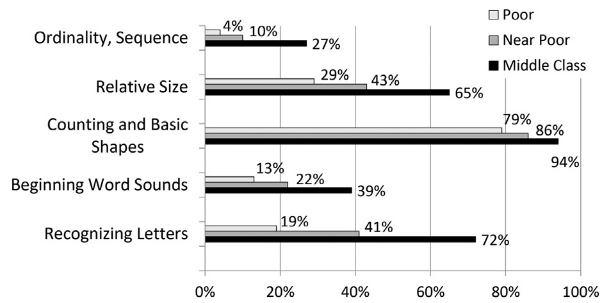

Figure 1. *Rates of kindergarten proficiencies for poor, near-poor, and middle-class children. Authors' calculations from the US Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey—Kindergarten Cohort. Poor is defined as income below the official US poverty thresholds. Near poor is defined as income between 1 and 2 times that poverty line. Middle class is defined as income above twice the poverty line.*

An obvious advantage of a higher family income is that it enables parents to buy books, computers, high-quality child care, summer camps, music lessons, private schooling, and other enrichments for their children. In the early 1970s, the richest 20% of families spent about $3000 more per child per year (in 2014 dollars) on child enrichment than did the poorest 20%.[8] By 2006, this gap had nearly tripled, to $8000 per child per year. This adds up to a $100,000 spending gap over the course of a child's primary and secondary schooling—a huge amount. Of course, child development also depends on the amount and quality of time and attention parents are able to provide to their children. But money matters here too, as higher-income parents are able to free themselves from time-consuming housework and maintenance activities.[9]

A sometimes overlooked consequence of income inequality is increased residential economic segregation. Compared with 40 years ago, poor families are now more likely to be surrounded by other poor families, while high-income families are more likely to be surrounded by other affluent families.[10] Because most children still attend schools close to their homes, rising residential economic segregation creates economically segregated schools—with increasing concentrations of low- and high-income children attending separate schools.[11] This has shaped school functioning and contributed in several ways to the increasing gap between the achievement and educational attainments of children growing up in low- and high-income families. Specifically, the quality of education provided in schools serving high concentrations of low-income students is compromised by a disproportionate number of children with academic problems and behavioral issues, high rates of student mobility during the school year, and difficulties in attracting strong, stable teaching faculties.[7]

Over the past 40 years, economic changes have both increased the skills and qualifications children need to obtain a good middle-class job and made it much more difficult for children from low-income families to attend schools that teach those skills effectively. Policy makers and educators have responded to this changing landscape with several kinds of educational innovations. One strategy has been to increase access to high-quality early education programs. Another has focused on improving the quality of K–12 schooling. We discuss each in turn.

Preschool Education Interventions

The large gaps in foundational academic skills between poor and nonpoor children shown in Figure 1 point to the importance of family conditions early in life. That such skills are also teachable outside the home is a key rationale for providing disadvantaged children with a year or two of enriching preschool education before they enter the formal school system.[12] While evaluations of hundreds of preschool programs have been published over the past 50 years,[13,14] only a handful of such programs have figured prominently in policy discussions about early childhood investments. These include Perry Preschool, the Abecedarian program, Head Start, and, more recently, some state-level prekindergarten (pre-K) programs.

Model Programs

During the 1960s, Perry provided 1 or 2 years of part-day educational services and weekly home visits to 58 low-income, low-IQ African American children aged 3 and 4 in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Per-pupil costs amounted to about $20,000 per child (in 2014 dollars). Perry produced sizable increases in children's academic skills by the end of the program while also boosting employment rates and reducing the number of arrests in adulthood. Heckman and colleagues[15] estimate that the program generated a social rate of return of between 7% and 10%.

The Abecedarian program, which served 57 low-income African American families from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, enrolled its participants in the first year of life and provided them with a full-time, high-quality early education curriculum until the beginning of kindergarten. The program cost about $80,000 per child (in 2014 dollars). It too improved children's early skills, had lasting effects on educational attainment, and generated a social rate of return exceeding 7%.[16]

It is difficult to extract policy lessons from Perry and Abecedarian to apply to early education programs that states or the federal governments might offer today. Both programs were designed and run by researchers and served only several dozen children, and at quality levels that few large-scale programs can match. Moreover, control-group conditions in the 1960s and 1970s were very different than they are today. Family sizes were much larger, parent education levels were much lower, and very few poor children attended center-based preschool. Consequently, the standard of care available to low-income children who did not participate in Perry or Abecedarian was lower than that available to low-income children today. On the other hand, neighborhoods are more segregated by income than they used to be. As a result, the neighborhoods in which low-income families lived several decades ago may have been safer and have had more social resources than their counterparts today.[9]