Early Childhood Education: Worth Doing—and Worth Doing Right

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As common sense has long suggested, the early experiences of babies and young children have a big impact on the rest of their lives. A growing body of scientific research shows that a child's early years are crucial for learning and brain development, laying the groundwork for lifelong intellectual ability, social functioning, and emotional well-being. Starting at birth, a young child's brain forms 42,000 new neural connections per minute that are heavily shaped by early experiences.[1] As researchers from Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child explain, "Early experiences determine whether a child's developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health."[2]

Because of the great importance of early experiences for brain development, the consequences of social and economic disadvantage at a young age can be dire. Without intervention, the effects of significant adversity, such as poverty, neglect, maltreatment, low maternal education, or living in a single-parent home, produce persistent, long-term, damaging effects on children's learning and development. The results of this are both expensive and a great waste of human potential.

Differences in the size of children's vocabulary first appear at 18 months of age, based on whether they are born into a family with high or low levels of education and income. By age three, children with college-educated parents have vocabularies as much as three times larger than those whose parents did not complete high school.[3] Large gaps are evident even for something as basic as naming colors:

in one study, 68 percent of four-year-olds from the top socioeconomic quintile scored 10 out of 10 on a color-naming test, compared to only 16 percent of children from the lowest quintile.[4] For many poor children, such early differences are amplified, not diminished, by K–12 public schooling. Just 5 percent of children whose parents did not graduate from high school end up getting a college degree.[5]

And these are the children who have a high risk of ending up with a familiar litany of failures and afflictions: landing in special education, being suspended or expelled from school, dropping out, having children when unprepared for parenthood, going to prison, and failing to get and keep a stable job.

Unfortunately, the number of children born into such risk is not small. Fifteen percent of America's children live in a household headed by a high-school dropout. Twenty-five percent of children under six years of age live in poverty, and more than half of those live with a single mother. Among African American children under six, 45 percent are poor, 30 percent live in areas of concentrated poverty, and 67 percent live with a single parent.[6]

Driven by new understanding of early brain development, the American public has increasingly recognized the importance of ensuring that the country's youngest citizens receive the early care and education they need to thrive. In a June 2014 national, bipartisan poll, 85 percent of respondents said that "making sure that our children get a strong start in life" is extremely or very important.[7] Politicians from across the political spectrum evidently agree, with many calling for greater investments in early education.

The approach gaining the most traction is the large-scale expansion of preschool programs at federal, state, and city levels. President Barack Obama recently proposed a 10-year, $76 billion "Preschool for All" plan aimed to make early childhood education available to all low- and middle-income four-year-olds across the country. Thirty-five states have submitted applications to the US Department of Education's new "Preschool Development" grants program, competing for a share of $250 million allocated to help states "build, develop, and expand high-quality preschool programs."[8] In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio is rolling out universal pre-K for

four-year-olds, with 50,000 slots available this year and plans to add 20,000 more in September 2015.

These preschool programs are often touted as nothing short of a miracle solution to the persistent problem of unequal opportunity and the school achievement gap. A leading early education expert described Obama's preschool proposal as "one of the most important education initiatives, maybe since *Brown v. Board of Education*," claiming that it will provide a "huge increase in educational opportunity" and potentially transform education in the United States. De Blasio announced his New York City initiative as a "historic and transformative plan" that "will lift up all children and aggressively tackle inequality." His schools chancellor, Carmen Farina, proclaimed that the extra year of school "will change the trajectory of our students' lives—and transform our school system."[9]

Substantial evidence does show that early education can have a strongly positive impact on disadvantaged children. But *how* it is done is as important as whether it is done at all. As University of Chicago economist and early childhood education proponent James Heckman has stressed, "Quality really matters."[10] And there's reason to be skeptical that big government preschool programs will be capable of measuring up to the lofty rhetoric that has been used to promote them.

To understand the limitations of current proposals, we need only turn to the public schools. The 99,000 US public schools provide full-day education for 50 million American children from ages 6 to 18. These schools are staffed with highly qualified, credentialed professionals, all of whom have bachelor's degrees and more than half of whom have master's degrees too. Scientifically based, carefully approved curricula are used throughout. Free, universal access is guaranteed at an average cost of $12,000 per child per year, for a total of $600 billion in public spending annually.

Yet this long-standing education "program" is not serving our country's most vulnerable children very well. After four full years of public schooling, for example, only 29 percent of low-income children are proficient in reading and 25 percent are proficient in mathematics. Among African American children, just 18 percent

are proficient in reading and the same percentage in math.[11] So the question is: what about these new public preschool programs will be so different from what we already have in public K–12 education? Will it really make things that much better to add another year to an enormous system that is already failing to help our country's neediest kids?

Done right, early education *can* have a positive, life-changing impact on disadvantaged children. But, as always, figuring out what works is much harder than pointing out what does not. We should proceed deliberately and with due caution—especially since the stakes are so high. As a starting point, here are four principles to guide our efforts:

1. **Empower parents.** Centrally managed systems have a poor track record of improving K–12 schools, and there is little reason to think they will do better with early education. A market system that gives power to parents has a much better chance of success. For this to work, parents need the freedom to choose programs that meet their needs, good options to choose from, and the financial resources to actually utilize what is available.

2. **Encourage entrepreneurs.** To improve both quality and availability of programs, state and local governments should encourage new and existing providers to establish and expand programs that are responsive to the needs of local families. Governments should provide low-income families with vouchers or subsidies to defray costs for the programs they decide are best for their children.

3. **Ensure transparency.** Parents need clear and accessible information to choose wisely. States and districts should require that programs publicize data on their services and outcomes in formats that parents of varied language backgrounds and reading levels can understand. Local governments should also facilitate other ways of ensuring that parents have access to information, such as creating guides, providing referral services, and working

with community organizations to create opportunities for families to come together to share information on programs.

4. **Do not limit the pool of high-quality teachers.** Teacher quality is the primary driver of program quality in early childhood education. Embedded in some current pre-K proposals is a definition of a "high-quality" teacher as someone who has a college degree. But content knowledge is not what makes early childhood teachers effective. What is crucial is how teachers interact with young children to support their social, emotional, and cognitive growth. Good teachers of very young children must have unique skills and dispositions, but not those necessarily needed for or acquired by going to college. With the right training and pay, early childhood teaching can be established as a great career path for bright, hardworking high school graduates. This will yield a much larger pool of high-quality teachers for early learners, while also serving as a good, meaningful job for talented people who do not have a college degree.

If anything warrants government attention, it is helping our country's least advantaged children get a fair opportunity to realize the potential they are born with.

The well-being of America's most vulnerable kids is crucial to both their life chances and the success of our country as a whole, and failing to act on this issue condemns millions of our youngest citizens to a bad start that many can never overcome. So early education *is* worth doing. And that is precisely why it is worth doing right.

Notes

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