

Preschool Promises: Starting Early on a New Educational Agenda for the United States

October 21, 2010

Two children, both age 3, enroll in publicly funded preschool. But they may have vastly different experiences: One child may attend preschool for 8 hours a day and be taught by a teacher with a bachelor's degree while the other child may be in preschool for only a few hours a day, under the supervision of a teacher with a 2-year degree. Why is there so much variability and are these programs meeting their potential for adequately preparing youngsters for school?

In a new report in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, Robert C. Pianta (University of Virginia), W. Steven Barnett (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey), Margaret Burchinal (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), and Kathy R. Thornburg (University of Missouri) review the current state of publicly funded preschool, what science has taught us about early childhood education, and offer suggestions for improving efficacy of these programs.

The programs that fall under the category of “publicly supported preschool education” (e.g., child care centers, Head Start, and state-funded pre-kindergarten) have such a wide variety of basic aims, funding, program models, and staff qualifications, it almost seems as though no two preschool programs are alike.

“Overall, preschool in the United States is a stunningly complex, wide-ranging, and highly varied assortment of early care and educational offerings that take place in very diverse settings and with often inadequate resources that are also constrained in how they may be used,” Pianta and his colleagues write. One reason for this variability is differences in the major government programs that fund them. For example, pre-kindergarten is often supported at the state and local levels while Head Start standards and regulations are determined at the federal level.

Despite all of these differences, numerous studies have shown that preschool improves the learning and development of young children, and that the benefits of preschool are long-lasting: Enrollment in preschool has been associated with less grade repetition, higher rates of high school graduation, and improved social behavior. Children from low-income homes in particular benefit from preschool education in comparison with their peers from high-income homes.

However, the magnitude of the benefits depends on the quality of the program: On average, due to the prevalence of low-quality preschool programs, preschool in the U.S. narrows the achievement gap by perhaps only 5% rather than the 30% to 50% that research suggests might be possible on a large scale if all preschool programs were of higher quality.

Although “quality” can refer to a number of factors, research indicates that the most important factor in determining quality of preschool programs may be what teachers do, and how they do it, when

interacting with children. The authors note that “effective teaching in early childhood education requires skillful combinations of explicit instruction, sensitive and warm interactions, responsive feedback, and verbal engagement or stimulation intentionally directed to ensure children’s learning while embedding these interactions in a classroom environment that is not overly structured or regimented.”

Professional development of preschool teachers may result in improved interactions with the students, which may lead to considerable skill gains in children. However, professional development can take many forms, and public funds devoted to teacher development must be used in ways that are beneficial to students and teachers (as suggested by research), not in ways that are merely convenient to professional-development providers.

The authors show that to ensure that publicly funded preschool programs adequately prepare every child for school, public policy and practice need to align more closely with research on early childhood education. They conclude, “Increased public investment in effective preschool education programs for all children can produce substantial educational, social, and economic benefits, but only if the investments are in programs in which teaching is highly effective.”