

Achievement Gap of Low-Income Minority Children

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It is controversial whether or not a preschool education is essential for children's school readiness. Preschool education varies in effectiveness for children in California due to the fact that children come from different home environments. Middle-class mainstream students may not require a preschool education because they are in stimulating home environments with their parents. However, low-income minority children may fare better academically throughout their school life if they have the preschool foundation, although some may argue that the gains of a preschool education fade out with time. Recently, Governor Schwarzenegger passed the CA preschool reform bill package which is intended to close the achievement gap of California's children by creating a committee that would recommend possible improvements for preschool programs, but the California preschool reform bill package does not contribute to the closing of most low-income minority children's achievement gap because it doesn't increase access to high quality preschool programs.

The California reform bill package consists of Senate Bill 1629, the Early Learning Quality Improvement Act, and Assembly Bill 2759, The California State Preschool Program Act of 2008. Governor Schwarzenegger signed this preschool education legislation on September 26, 2008. In Governor Schwarzenegger's press release he claims that "This legislation will help to ensure early education programs are available to the children who need them most and that the State continues to achieve higher quality child development programs"(Office of the Governor). SB 1629 creates an Advisory Committee which will evaluate preschools and recommend improvements for the production of future high quality preschool programs (SB 1629). Accompanying SB 1629 is AB 2759, which is intended to consolidate all of California's current

child development programs to create the California State Preschool Program. Once the CA child development programs are streamlined, it will be the largest state-funded preschool program in the nation (AB 2759).

The California preschool reform bill package is not inclusive of low-income minority children because it makes an effort to create mainstream, high quality preschool that these children are not enrolled in. To close the achievement gap of low-income minority children, they need to be enrolled in high quality preschool programs, but the CA preschool reform bill package falls short of finding a way of getting this group of children into preschool. Racial and ethnic differences in enrollment are evident amongst Hispanic children. In 2000, as compared with the 43 percent of their white peers, only 23 percent of Hispanic three-year-olds were enrolled in preschool (Magnuson and Waldfogel 178). Although African-American children have a 6 percent higher enrollment in preschool than their white peers, they are not necessarily enrolled in the same types of programs (Magnuson and Waldfogel 179). This is due to the close connection between race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status. African American and Hispanic children are more likely to be a part of economically disadvantaged families; therefore, they are often in government funded preschool programs. However, according to Assemblyman Jones, the principal co-author of the Early Learning Quality Improvement Act, California, “state-funded preschool programs meet only 4 to 10 key benchmarks for quality” (SB 1629). Therefore, even if low-income minority children are enrolled in preschool programs, they are not receiving an equal education as their mainstream middle-class peers. The CA preschool reform bill package promotes high-quality preschool, but does not grant this education benefit to children from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

So then, what conditions define a “high quality” preschool? It is significant to address this question since the importance of enrolling low-income minority children in high quality preschool is consistently supported throughout this argument. First, a high-quality preschool program should have a high teacher-to-student ratio. These teachers should have bachelor degrees in early childhood development and also be trained to identify children’s behavioral problems so that they may help the children improve their social and emotional skills. Second, a parent-training component should be implemented so that parents may reinforce what teachers are doing in school. The parents would be taught how to handle behavioral problems and would be encouraged to read to their children. Third, high quality preschool programs would help parents get ongoing healthcare for their children. Fourth, the preschool program would have a cognitively stimulating curriculum which would allow for an easy transition to kindergarten. High quality preschool programs would be integrated with the kindergarten that its children would attend the following year (Brooks-Gunn et al. 12). If low-income minority children were enrolled in high quality preschools, their school readiness gap would narrow; subsequently, narrowing the achievement gap in the future of education.

Access to high quality preschool must be equalized by making it affordable for the families of low-income minority children. Although AB 2759 aims to create a single coordinated preschool program claiming to increase access to high quality preschools, there is no forthcoming funding for preschool anytime soon due to the federal government’s current budget deficit. Magnuson and Waldfogel estimate that it costs about \$8,000 a year per child to be in a high quality preschool program (172). The type of early education a child receives is correlated with family socioeconomic status. Most likely to be in preschool programs are children coming from families with higher incomes, meaning, families that are at equal to or greater than 200

percent of the poverty threshold (Magnuson and Waldfogel 179). Often times, low-income minority children do not attend any type of preschool or center care before entering kindergarten. Instead, they are cared for by their parents or relatives. Children coming from informal care as previously described entered kindergarten with lower reading and math skills than children who attended preschool, which is referred to as the school readiness gap (Magnuson and Waldfogel 178). Some may argue that low-income minority children have equal access to preschool as their mainstream middle class peers and that low socioeconomic status is not a hindrance for access to education. This is supported by the fact that childcare subsidies offset some of the costs for low-income working parents, along with financial assistance through tax provisions (Magnuson and Waldfogel 171). Although this is a valid claim, the achievement gap of low-income minorities continues to be present. A step toward progress is to get these children enrolled in high-quality preschool programs.

The CA preschool reform bill package recognizes that preschool programs need quality change, but it must be coupled with increased enrollment of low-income minority children to close their achievement gap. To close racial and ethnic gaps in school readiness, quality improvements do have to be initiated. It is fair to acknowledge that the CA preschool reform bill package is a step toward closing the achievement gap of low-income minority children only if a further initiative is taken to enroll these children in these high quality preschool programs. California must find a way to achieve equality of educational opportunities amongst all socioeconomic statuses and this is what the CA preschool reform bill package fails to do.

Preschool is important for low-income minority children because it promotes school readiness and contributes toward the closing of their achievement gap. Low-income minority children perform lower academically than their middle class peers. Data from the 2007

California Standard Test given to third-graders showed that 77 percent of third-graders from economically disadvantaged families were not proficient in English-language arts compared to 44 percent of their white, not economically disadvantaged peers (Karoly et al. 3). This same pattern of low-income minorities performing below CA state standards is evident in their mathematic performance. The second and third-graders that are performing below state standards are the same children that were behind when they entered kindergarten (Karoly et al. 3). Therefore, these children entered kindergarten with a school readiness gap and as they progressed in school, it became their achievement gap. This infers that achievement differences have early roots and this is why high-quality preschool programs are designed to promote school readiness aimed to raise achievement in the future.

Minority children coming from low-income families have limited resources that matter for school readiness. Although eliminating a family's income gap would not necessarily eliminate the achievement gap, it is correlated with family socioeconomic status. Children coming from higher income families have an advantage over their low-income peers because they are more likely to be in stimulating learning environments. These children encounter more learning experiences than low-income minority children and have access to a number of books and newspapers (Magnuson and Duncan 40). Such access to learning material allows for children to explore their curiosity of books and encourages them to want to learn how to read. A series of experimental welfare reform evaluation studies conducted in the 1990s showed that family income matters for children's achievement (Magnuson and Duncan 40). The study increased parental employment, although, only some increased family income. The children's academic achievement improved only when income was increased (Magnuson and Duncan 40). Therefore, children coming from low-income families lack financial resources. Parenting

behavior is associated with school readiness. Because of financial and time constraints, parents of low-income minority children are less likely to talk to, read to, and teach their children than parents of a high socioeconomic status (Brooks-Gunn et al. 8). Often, the parents of low-income minority children do not provide such learning opportunities because they have not been educated themselves. Among the 1998 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study's sample of kindergarteners, 9 percent of African-American and 8 percent of Hispanic mothers had completed a four-year college as compared to 28 percent of white mothers (Magnuson and Duncan 41). Differences in family resources, especially financial, contribute to low-income minority children's achievement gap when they are not enrolled in high quality preschool programs.

Preschool promotes social and emotional skills which are crucial for school readiness. Besides academic gains, preschool is responsible for physical health, verbal communication, raising curiosity and enthusiasm, and ability to share and take turns (Brooks-Gunn et al. 6). Exposure to such a setting is important for low-income minority children because children who enter school not prepared to learn continue to have difficulties later in life, hence their achievement gap. If low-income minority children were targeted for enrollment in high quality preschool programs, it would be easier to change their cognition and behavior in early childhood than in adolescence. According to a national survey conducted in the late 1990s, "46 percent of teachers indicated that at least half of children in their classroom were having problems following directions, some because of poor academic skills and others because of difficulties working in a group" (Brooks-Gunn et al. 6). Teachers noted that this problem was more common among Hispanic and African-American children. High quality preschool programs would promote the self-regulatory aspects of school readiness for low-income minority children.

With all of this, some may argue that the benefits of preschool fade over time because “early education in general is not so crucial to the long-term intellectual growth of children” (Dalmia and Snell 2). It is not realistic to think that because low-income minority children have attended preschool, they will be excluded against the risk of low academic achievement, but it most certainly helps (Magnuson and Waldfogel 188). To avoid the fade-out effects of preschool, interventions in the children’s elementary school years could reinforce initial positive effects to induce long-lasting changes. Also, it is important to note that preschool is not necessary for every single child, “Kids with loving and attentive parents...might well be better off spending more time at home than away in their formative years” (Dalmia and Snell 3). However, for low-income minority children, high quality preschool is the educational foundation these children need to narrow their achievement gap and it allows them to “enter school on a more even footing” (Magnuson and Waldfogel 188).

High quality preschool would give these children confidence as they enter kindergarten, as well as a motivation to learn. Closing the achievement gap of low-income minority children is important because they too are the adults of the future. It is of value to have educated people as a part of California and a high quality preschool education is the foundation for a new beginning of the future of these children.

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