Early Childhood Education: A Viable Defense Against Poverty

Kristin Sandberg
Early Childhood Education:
A Viable Defense Against Poverty

by
Kristin Sandberg

Introduction

In 1988, 13 percent of the United States population fell below the official poverty line (U.S. Department of Commerce 1990, 458). Twenty percent of the children in this nation grow up in poverty conditions (460), frequently without adequate food and shelter. These figures are actually higher than those during the 1970s, which suggests that we are losing the "war on poverty."

Most federal poverty programs provide income maintenance. Unemployment insurance, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and Social Security grant a monthly stipend to those whose incomes place them below the official poverty line. These programs do not, however, address the causes of poverty; they only sustain the individual marginally above an arbitrary "poverty line." We have not been able to terminate poverty because we do not fully understand its causes.

Brian Jones, doctor of sociology at Villanova University, asserts that we will never have an effective poverty policy until we determine a logical theory for the causes of poverty. We cannot solve a problem we do not understand. Jones observes that "since we have no verified theory of why particular people are poor, it follows ... that policy 'cures' will be poorly informed" (1984, 247). He also interprets the general lack of support for anti-poverty programs: "contemporary public perceptions of the 'welfare mess' reflect a hodgepodge of programs lacking a coherent rationale, and thus lacking any compelling reason for funding" (247). While we quibble about funding and theories, 31,878,000 Americans suffer the effects of poverty (U.S. Department of Commerce 1990, 460).

What actually causes poverty? Many Americans believe that poverty results from
individual characteristics, such as laziness, and that the individual is solely to blame (Smith and Stone 1989, 101). This is not necessarily true. Family composition, race, and education are three of the greatest determinants of poverty. Families with single parents are three times more likely to be poor than families where both parents are present. Blacks are twice as likely to be poor than whites (Patterson, Kupersmidt, and Vaden 1990, 488). Over 60 percent of those who did not graduate from high school are poor (U.S. Department of Commerce 1990, 461).

Family composition and race are variables which neither the individual nor the government can control. It is also true that in some cases the poor cannot control the amount of education they receive. However, when it comes to education, the federal government can and should intervene. The United States government should sponsor large-scale early education programs for low-income children because it will significantly increase academic ability, educational attainment, and economic well-being among the poor.

**Links Between Education and Poverty**

**Educational Attainment**

In many cases, the poor are poor because they have little education, and without education they cannot find jobs that pay well. A recent study showed that, except for race, education was the greatest determinant of poverty (Taylor and Chatters 1988, 439). Statistics from the U.S. Bureau of the Census confirm this finding, as shown in Table 1. In 1988, the unemployment rate was 9.6 percent for high school drop-outs, 5.4 percent for high school graduates, 3.7 percent for college dropouts, and 1.7 percent for college graduates (U.S. Department of Commerce 1990, 397). The mean annual income for high school drop-outs was $16,727, $25,910 for high school graduates, $31,865 for college dropouts, and $43,952 for college graduates (445). Clearly, more education equals less unemployment and higher income.

Christopher Jencks and his colleagues at the Harvard Center for Educational Research concur with the Commerce Department’s findings. Their research revealed that graduating from high school raises income 40 percent while graduating from college raises income 49 percent (1979, 182). However, the poor, those who would benefit most from additional education, do not receive it. Over 60 percent of the poor in the United States did not graduate from high school (U.S. Department of Commerce 1990, 461).

Perhaps the federal government should simply require college graduation for all citizens as a way to significantly reduce poverty. But, further analysis demonstrates that this approach could never work. In many instances, the poor do not pursue more education because they face significant sociological and economic barriers. We cannot simply require that they pursue more years of schooling. We must first understand and address these educational barriers so that the poor will be able to attain more education. These barriers originate in the family and begin hindering the poor in their early childhood.

**Family Background**

Being raised in an impoverished family often reduces educational achievement due to several sociological factors. The poor lack
Table 1

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNEMPLOYMENT, INCOME AND EDUCATION (1988)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UNEMPLOYMENT RATE</th>
<th>MEAN ANNUAL INCOME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL DROPouts</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>$16,727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>$25,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLEGE DROPouts</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>$31,865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLLEGE GRADUATES</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>$43,952</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


basic necessities such as clothing, food, and shelter which results in a high stress level for parents. A parent preoccupied with survival does not have as much time, energy, or attention to focus on the upbringing or education of children. Patterson, Kupersmidt, and Vaden observe that children raised in such stressful environments often suffer from short attention spans and emotional difficulties (1990, 491). These children frequently begin public school with emotional and educational handicaps.

Christopher Ruhm, an economist from Boston University, explains the economic reasons why poor children attain less education. He hypothesizes that the cost of education rises as personal income falls. Thus, education is actually cheaper for the non-poor than for the poor. First, poor parents contribute less money to their children’s educations. Second, they spend less time training their children at home. Third, they have fewer educational resources at home, such as books, encyclopedias, and computers. Fourth, poor parents do not exhibit certain marketable skills which other parents exhibit and pass on to their children (Ruhm 1988, 157). It is more difficult and more costly for poor children to become educated than for other children.

Christopher Jencks and his colleagues agree that family background influences income level and educational attainment. They discovered that "being white, having a mother or father with a lot of schooling, having a father with a high-status occupation, having parents with high incomes, and coming from a small family all enhance a son's economic prospects" (1979, 60). In
the study, families with these characteristics were defined as "advantaged families." Jencks elaborates:

We concluded that family background as a whole explained about 48 percent of the variance in occupational status and 15-35 percent of the variance in earnings among men in the early 1970s. These estimates imply that those who do well economically owe almost half of their occupational advantage and 55-85 percent of their earnings advantage to family background (81).

These studies show that, to some extent, wealth and poverty are passed from generation to generation.

Children from advantaged families tend to have higher incomes because they are more educated than poor children. In fact, increased education accounts for 40-50 percent of the effect of family background on earnings and 60-70 percent of its effect on occupational status (Jencks and others 1979, 78). Children from advantaged families not only receive more education, but they also seem to have higher levels of cognitive and non-cognitive abilities, such as inter-personal skills, as well as higher career aspirations than poor children. However, even when researchers controlled for differences in ability, education, and occupation, Jencks still found that people from advantaged families have higher incomes than those from poor families (70-71).

Academic Ability

Another reason that low-income children attain less education than middle-income children is that they perform at lower levels in school. Charlotte Patterson, Janis Kupersmidt, and Nancy Vaden conducted a study of elementary school children and established that those from low income families tended to have lower academic achievement as well as more behavior and peer relationship problems (1990, 490). Most researchers recognize that low-income children both perform more poorly in school and receive less education than wealthier peers.

Christopher Jencks analyzed eleven studies of American men and determined that those who perform at lower achievement levels in school have lower levels of economic success as adults. High school students who scored lower on standardized achievement tests received lower status jobs with lower incomes than those that scored higher (1979, 85). A fifteen point difference on standardized tests corresponded to a 30 percent decrease in income (220). The fact that low scorers pursue fewer years of schooling accounts for 60 to 80 percent of this income difference (112).

Students who score well on tests receive more encouragement to attain additional education and have higher ambitions. They "have more discussions with teachers, more parental encouragement, and higher aspirations among their peers than low-scoring individuals" (Jencks and others 1979, 108). These students are more likely to have friends that are going to college, parents that want them to go to college, and thus, ambitions to go to college. In short, students who perform well on tests receive more income largely because these students pursue more years of schooling than their low-scoring peers (104).

From early childhood, poor children are handicapped by sociological, economic, and academic barriers which limit their opportunity to receive an education. Due to this educational disadvantage, poor children will grow up to be poor adults. Their children will also grow up in poverty and suffer the same educational disadvantage. As a result of this intergenerational cycle, the poor,
those who most need an education, are least able to get it.

One study theorizes that education is twice as valuable from an economic standpoint to the poor than to the non-poor (Cohen and Tyree 1986, 812). Yet, children of the poor are only half as likely as children of the non-poor to go on to college (808). The poor need help. Unaided, it is nearly impossible for them to escape from this intergenerational cycle of educational disadvantage.

Benefits of Preschool Education

Numerous studies over the last thirty years have revealed that early childhood education for poor children can compensate for the socialization and education that they do not receive at home and thereby reduce "inequality for disadvantaged families" (Ruhm 1988, 162). Poor children enrolled in preschool learn cognitive and non-cognitive skills such as "attentiveness to teachers, ability to follow instructions, and task perseverance." They are better prepared to compete with their wealthier peers in the classroom and have a more positive attitude toward school generally. This positive attitude perpetuates itself, causing the students to have a much more successful "public school experience" (Lazar and Darlington 1982, 64). They then pursue more education, which results in higher income. The federal government must provide this education because the poor cannot afford it themselves.

Significant Studies

Several studies of preschool programs have been conducted in order to establish their advantage to poor children. One of the most significant studies is the Perry Preschool Project which was conducted by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. In 1962 a large sample of poor, black, 3-year-olds began a two year preschool program. The preschool continued for five years, and new children were enrolled as the older ones graduated to kindergarten. The children were tested both during and after the preschool experience and compared on a number of tests to children in the control group who did not go to preschool. Although the children received no further experimental education after age five, the researchers followed them through their educational careers and tested their abilities compared to those in the control group. The most recent results were published in 1984 when the children were 19 years old (see Table 2). The original subjects are now 25 years old, and data is currently being gathered for the next publication which is expected within the year (Berrueta-Clement and others 1984).

Another significant analysis was performed by Irving Lazar and Richard Darlington of the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies. They organized a collaboration of twelve separate researchers who performed independent preschool studies in the 1960s. In 1976 they pooled their original data and did a follow-up analysis of the children in all twelve studies, including the Perry project (1982). Both the Perry project and the Lazar-Darlington investigation established the benefits of preschool for the poor.

Family Background

Preschool not only changed the lives of the students, but also the lives of their parents. Lazar and Darlington found that the mothers of preschool students reported feeling much
more satisfied with their children's school success than non-preschool moms, even in those cases where the children actually did not perform better. The preschool moms also had much higher aspirations for their children's futures. "This suggests that early education may have affected the familial context with respect to achievement orientation" explain Lazar and Darlington (1982, 54). Preschool children are more likely to be encouraged by their parents and, therefore, more likely to do better in school.

**Academic Ability**

The educational literature concurs that a well-run preschool will raise the IQ of disadvantaged children during the course of the program (Lazar and Darlington 1982, 44). The IQ gains of the experimental group over the control group are consistently significant three to five years after preschool ends. Most studies show that IQ differences level off by age ten to seventeen; however, these studies all relied on IQ testing performed by the schools, which often yields biased results. The Perry study administered IQ testing in a standardized, laboratory setting, and it demonstrated that IQ gains continued throughout high school. Lazar and Darlington contend that the Perry project, which was conducted by David Weikart, is the most reliable study (1982, 43).

Low-income preschool students enter kindergarten not only with significantly higher IQ levels than those who received no early education, but also with markedly increased learning and adapting skills. They are already acquainted with a classroom situation and have a more positive attitude towards school. Studies reveal that they enter school at nearly the same competence level as their middle-income peers, while poor children in the control group begin with a significant disadvantage. Preschool gives these disadvantaged children the head-start they desperately need. Even if the initial IQ gains disappear, the long term effects of positive attitude and personal achievement have already determined a course of success that the children will follow.

**Educational Attainment**

Low-income children placed in preschool are less likely to have failure experiences at school. Lazar and Darlington found that while 28.6 percent of low-income students are placed in special education programs, only 13.8 percent of poor children who went to preschool were placed in special education. Preschool children were also significantly less likely to be held back a grade (1982, 55). Lazar and Darlington affirm that "early education significantly improved the ability of low-income children to meet their schools' requirements for adequate performance, as reflected in reduced rates of assignment to special educational and retention in grade" (55). Even when the researchers controlled for the before-preschool IQ level and the family background of the children, preschool children still had an "improved competence rate of 16 percent." As Lazar and Darlington proclaim, "Any effort that positively affects the lives of 16 percent of participants would appear to be educationally worthwhile" (57).

Students who must repeat a grade or who are enrolled in special education are much more likely to drop out of high school (Lazar and Darlington 1982, 58). When placed in special education or held back, they are frequently labeled "emotionally
Table 2

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF CHILDREN IN THE PERRY PROJECT (1984)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NO PRESCHOOL</th>
<th>PRESCHOOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PURSUED ACADEMIC POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PURSUED VOCATIONAL POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Disturbed" or "mentally retarded" and suffer from feelings of low self-worth. Also, Lazar and Darlington note that their low performance levels place them on slower learning tracks, which limits their educational opportunities. As we have seen, through preschool attendance, low-income children can avoid these scenarios and have a much greater chance of success. Children who succeed in high school are much more likely to go on to college.

As illustrated in Table 2, the Perry project researchers found that 67 percent of preschool students graduated from high school compared to only 49 percent of non-preschoolers. Nationally, only 60 percent of black youth graduate from high school; thus, preschool raised the percentage for disadvantaged blacks above the national level (Berrueta-Clement and others 1984, 30-31). Nineteen percent of preschool children pursued academic post-secondary education compared to 13 percent in the control group. Another 19 percent of preschoolers pursued vocational post-secondary training, compared to only 10 percent of non-preschoolers (31). "Preschool helped study participants overcome some of the disadvantages of coming from lower-income families and of being more educationally vulnerable than the national black population" (30).
ECONOMIC GAINS

As we would expect, this educational advantage leads to a direct economic advantage: less poverty. Since low-income children who receive early education perform better in school and receive more education, they have more success in the job market and earn higher incomes. At age nineteen, 50 percent of the Perry Preschool children were employed, while only 32 percent of their non-preschool peers were employed (see Table 3). On the average, those with early education had been unemployed for 4.9 months since high school graduation compared to 10.3 months of unemployment for the control group. These employment figures translate into an annual income of $2800 for the study group and $1100 for the control group (Berrueta-Clement and others 1984, 46).

Preschool not only contributed to financial success, but it also contributed to financial independence. Sixty-two percent of the preschool children had saved some money by age nineteen. Only 48 percent of their counterparts had saved any money (Berrueta-Clement and others 1984, 51). Nearly
half of these children were financially independent at age nineteen, compared to one-fourth of the others (50).

Perhaps most astonishing is the fact that, at age nineteen, 32 percent of the low-income children who received no preschool had received some form of public assistance, averaging $1509 per person (excluding unemployment insurance and social security). However, just 18 percent of the children who had preschool education had received welfare payments, averaging only $633 per person (Berrueta-Clement and others 1984, 50). In welfare payments alone, two years of early education saved society nearly $1000 per person. The Perry researchers assure, "the weight of evidence and the trends over time suggest that the effect will increase in succeeding years" (54).

When the gross economic benefits are totaled (including increased lifetime savings, school district savings due to less special education, and the release time of parents while their children were in preschool), the Perry Preschool Project grossed a 248 percent return on its investment (Lazar and Darlington 1982, 58). This does not include the value of decreased human suffering from poverty and increased human satisfaction from personal achievement.

**Conclusion**

In order to combat poverty in an effective, efficient manner, the federal government must establish early education programs for low-income children on a massive scale. Early education for low-income children will improve academic ability, increase educational attainment, raise income, and help to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Lazar and Darlington observe how preschool, with "relatively few inputs, a few hours a day for one to two years," without significant post study follow-through, can have statistically significant educational and economic impacts (1982, 58). The overall improvement was so great because several interrelated variables, such as IQ, academic ability, non-cognitive skills, and attitude, were influenced (59).

When implementing this program on the national level, we must remember that the laboratory preschools were academically oriented and had low student-teacher ratios. A successful federal preschool should incorporate these same variables. However, the lab preschools were flexible and will allow some variation. Another consideration is that these were voluntary programs in which the parents desired to participate (Lazar and Darlington 1982, 59). Perhaps a mandatory system would accrue slightly different results.

Certainly more research and careful planning are needed in order to insure that the most effective federal preschools are established. However, the evidence clearly demands that early education be provided for low-income children now. Early education will not eradicate poverty, but it will undoubtedly curtail the suffering of the poor.
WORKS CITED


