

Life Cycles Education Policy: Adult Education Makes Early Childhood Education a Good Economic Development Strategy

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Nobel Prize economist James J. Heckman was interviewed in June of 2005 by the Minneapolis branch of the Federal Reserve Bank. He was asked about making the case for early childhood education (ECE) as an economic development strategy.

In his response, Heckman downplayed the effects of ECE on cognitive skills, and instead stated, " Enriched early intervention programs targeted to disadvantaged children have had their biggest effect on noncognitive skills: motivation, self-control and time preference. We know that there's a scientific basis for this finding. The prefrontal cortex, which is a center of these noncognitive skills, matures late. The executive function, the very definition of ourselves as people, the way we motivate ourselves, these things are malleable until quite late stages—into the 20s, according to research by neuroscientists. This means that in principle we can modify these behaviors. Noncognitive skills are powerfully predictive of a number of socioeconomic measures (crime, teenage pregnancy, education and the like.... Kids in the Perry Preschool Program, an early childhood intervention, are much more successful than similar kids without intervention even though their IQs are no higher. And the same is true of many such interventions. There is a lot of research on such programs."

Heckman also considered that by starting early enough with ECE it may be possible to actually raise the IQs of disadvantaged children. In this regard he cited the Abcedarian program aimed at disadvantaged children and which starts at 3 or 4 months after the children are born and intervenes up to age 8 in some cases.

Interestingly, in other economic analyses, Lynch (2004) also cited the research on the Perry Preschool and Abcedarian projects, along with other ECE programs, as supporting the importance of ECE preschool programs. Lynch states that many of these early education childhood programs " also provide adult education and parenting classes for the parents of young children." (p vii). This suggests that perhaps a significant percentage of the benefits that early childhood education programs produce might result from the effects of adult parenting and literacy education activities that take place in these programs.

Indeed, recent research by Morrison, Bachman, & Connor (2005) has questioned the effectiveness of both childcare and preschool programs that do not focus on improving parenting skills. Concerning childcare, they say, "Overall, parenting appears to be a more important source of influence on children's development than is childcare. ... the contribution of parenting was about three to four times greater than that of early childcare. ...high-quality childcare will not offset the negative effect of poor parenting, and poor-quality childcare will not prevent success for children with effective parents." (pp. 48,49).

The fact that Heckman points to the importance of noncognitive skills as important outcomes of preschool, such as increasing children's motivation for and interest in education, is also suggestive of the importance of adult education in contributing to the

cost-benefits of ECE. Numerous studies of adult basic education (ABE) have found that noncognitive skills are the major outcomes of ABE. Almost universally, studies of ABE outcomes report that adults feel better about themselves, they overcome learned helplessness, they feel more motivated to succeed in life, and, importantly, these positive noncognitive skills often modify adults' behaviors with their children.

In research with Wider Opportunities for Women, Sandra Van Fossen and I found that mothers enrolled in basic skills programs reported that they spoke more with their children about school, they read to them more, they took them to the library more and so forth (Van Fossen & Sticht, 1991). In one visit to a single mother's home, the mother's second grader said, "I do my homework just like Mommy"... and thrust his homework into the researcher's hand. This type of noncognitive skill development in the child was obtained for free as a spin-off of an adult basic skills program.

This type of intergenerational transfer of noncognitive skills from parents to their children in adult basic education and early childhood education programs means that more attention needs to be paid to the role of adult education in contributing to the cost-benefits of both ABE and ECE.

Extensive research also shows that adult's cognitive, language, and literacy skills can be transferred intergenerationally to their children. Hart & Risley (1995) present extensive data showing how the oral language skills of parents in professional, working class, and welfare homes are used to transfer thinking, language, and literacy skills to their children.

Because of the importance of adult basic education in promoting the intergenerational transfer of both cognitive and noncognitive skills from parents to their children, education policy needs to be focused not just on one child's life cycle, but on the life cycles of both adults and their children.

A "Life Cycles" policy for education explicitly recognizes that educational policies do not affect only one generation but through the intergenerational transfer of motivation, language, and literacy they affect many cycles of lives across generations (see also Sticht, 1983). For this reason governments need to invest in adult literacy and lifelong education with the understanding that this investment will not only provide returns in terms of increased productivity, health, and civic participation on the part of the adults, but also with the understanding that the investment in the education of adults may also produce returns in the increased educability of the adult's children. Good adult education in parenting is the backbone of good preschool education.

Today we have a better understanding that poorly educated children are the source of adult functional illiteracy, and functionally illiterate adults are the source of poorly educated children. The hope is that through education based on a Life Cycles policy, in which children are guaranteed their right to educated parents, the vicious intergenerational cycles of functional illiteracy can be stopped at their sources.

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