

Research Note

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Early Childhood Education and Early Adulthood Education: A Life Cycles Perspective for Educational Policy

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In a recent report for the Economic Policy Institute of Washington, DC, Lynch (2004) provides an analysis of several early childhood development (ECD) programs and concludes that they produce a considerable benefit to cost ratio. He states, "Investments in high-quality ECD programs consistently generate benefit-cost ratios exceeding 3-to-1—or more than a \$3 return for every \$1 invested—well above the 1-to-1 ratio needed to justify such investments. (p. vii).

Importantly, on this same page Lynch states that many of these ECD programs "...also provide adult education and parenting classes for the parents of young children." (p vii). This suggested to me that perhaps a significant percentage of the benefits that ECD programs produce might result from the effects of what might be called early adulthood development (EAD) activities. In other words, it seems possible to me that much of what is attributed to early childhood education programs might actually be resulting in some significant part from the educational or motivational effects that such programs have on the adult parents or parents-to-be of the children who are enrolled in the programs. If that is so, then these studies of ECD may also be taken as studies of EAD, and call for a much greater investment in the education of young adults who are of childbearing and rearing ages.

Following are some extracts taken directly from Lynch's report that suggest how adult education of the children's parents, even if this is only indirect education through participation with the program operators, may be important in influencing the long term benefit-cost ratios that Lynch describes.

Perry Preschool Project (Ypsilanti, Michigan, 1962-1967)

"Description: One hundred and twenty-three African American children with low IQs (in the 70 to 85 range) and from families with low socioeconomic status were randomly assigned to one of two groups: one enrolled in a pre-school program and one not. Those enrolled in preschool attended for two school years at ages three and four. Services included daily 2.5-hour classes and weekly 1.5-hour home visits with mother and child. Evaluations of the children were performed annually until the children reached age 11, and then again at ages 14, 15, 19, and 27. A forthcoming analysis will follow the children through age 41." (p. 24)

"The economic benefits of the Perry Preschool Project were probably under-estimated ...For example, given that the preschool program was a form of childcare, some of the mothers of program participants were probably able to increase their employment and earnings relative to what they would have been without the program, and thus they probably also increased their tax contributions and decreased their welfare consumption." (p. 26)

The Prenatal/Early Infancy Project (Elmira, New York, 1978-1982)

"Four hundred first-time mothers were enrolled in the program before their 30th week of pregnancy. The women enrolled in the program were overwhelmingly at high risk of poor child and family outcomes: 85% were under age 19 and/or unmarried and/or of low socioeconomic status. The women were randomly assigned to one of two intervention groups or one of two control groups." (p. 26)

"Intervention group mothers also felt the benefits of the program. Intervention group mothers in the high-risk sample spent fewer months on welfare (60.4 versus 90.3) and received food stamps for less time (46.7 months versus 83.5 months) than did the high-risk control group mothers. By the time the children were 15, intervention group mothers in the high-risk sample were much less subject to arrest (18% versus 58%), conviction (6% versus 28%), and incarceration than were the mothers in the high-risk control group. Intervention group mothers in the high-risk sample experienced fewer subsequent pregnancies (1.5 versus 2.2) and went a longer time between the first and second birth (68.8 months versus 37.3 months) than did the mothers in the high-risk control group. The intervention group mothers in the high-risk sample also reported many fewer episodes of impairment due to alcohol or drugs than did the high-risk control group mothers." (p. 27)

The Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention (North Carolina, 1972-1985)

"At age five all the children were reassigned to either a special intervention program through age eight or a control group. The intervention program involved having parents engage in specific supplemental education activities for the children in their homes. The parents were provided with educational material and training, with which to engage their children, roughly every two weeks. Data were collected at ages three, five, eight, 12, 15, and 21." (p. 28)

"When the preschoolers were approximately four and a half years old, data were collected on the mothers who were under age 18 at the time they gave birth. These young mothers were more likely to have graduated from high school, attained post high school education, been employed, and been self-supporting than were the young mothers in the control group. On average, these young mothers had more education (11.9 years versus 10.3 years) than did the control group's mothers. Moreover, only 23% of these young mothers had an additional birth compared to 40% of control group mothers." (p. 30)

The Chicago Child-Parent Center Program (Chicago, Illinois, 1967 to present).

"Parental involvement with the schools was much higher among the parents of center children than it was for the parents of non-center children. By ages 20 and 22, the high school graduation rates for center children were 50% and 65% compared to just 39% and 54% for non-center children." (pp. 31-32)

Early Head Start

"Early Head Start is an extension of the Head Start program that targets low-income pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers. It serves over 60,000 children from birth to age three in some 700 programs nationwide." (p.32)

"A carefully controlled, randomized assessment of the Early Head Start program is in progress but has not yet been completed. However, preliminary results have been

reported... By age three, children in Early Head Start performed significantly better than control groups on cognitive, language, and social-emotional development indicators. Their parents were more emotionally supportive, used less punitive parenting, provided more stimulating home environments, and read more to their children. The parents were also more likely to participate in education and job training and less likely to have another child during the two years after enrollment in Early Head Start than were control group parents." (p.34)

Educational Rights of Children and Adults

Rosa Maria Torres (2003) has argued for what I call a "life cycles" policy for education in which it is recognized that educational policies do not affect only one generation but through the intergenerational transfer of language and literacy they affect many cycles of lives across generations. She has argued that, "...the children's right to education should include the right to educated parents."

Given the data from Lynch (2004) extracted above, it appears entirely possible that much of the benefits of early childhood development programs have their roots in the effects that such programs have as adult education intervention programs for the children's parents. For this reason, advocates of both early childhood education and adult education should join forces in seeking equitable funding for adult education and literacy development. It just could be that one of the best investments we can make for children's education, is an investment in the education of adults.

All children have a right to educated parents!

References

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