

More Than "A is for Alligator"

How to Ensure Early Childhood Systems Help Break the Cycle of Poverty

BY LISA GUERNSEY

Early childhood programs have become Exhibit A in conventional accounts of how to eradicate inequality and poverty. Advocates for early childhood programs, most notably Head Start, routinely argue that such programs help children enter school ready to learn, increasing their likelihood of academic success and reducing the chances that they remain poor in adulthood.

But today's classroom realities make this difficult to realize. If disadvantaged kids are going to achieve in school and life, classrooms must be more than play spaces staffed with babysitters. Nor should children be subjected to sit-in-your-seats, miniaturized versions of school. Instead, the programs they attend must be high quality and developmentally appropriate—maddeningly difficult characteristics to define, let alone achieve.

Let me set the stage by comparing two hypothetical classrooms for four-year-olds.

Enter Classroom One. The teacher starts with the standard "circle time" in which the children gather in a circle on the rug. She reads the children a picture book about alligators, then dismisses them to tables where they receive photocopied sheets showing an alligator next to the letter A. While the kids select their crayons, she asks them to repeat after her: "A, ah, alligator. A, ah, alligator." They answer back and begin coloring as if on autopilot: scribble, grab a new crayon, scribble, repeat.

Now enter Classroom Two. The teacher reads a book about alligators, takes a brief moment to point to the word "alligator," and notes that it starts with "A." She then asks the children what they know about alligators. One child mentions their sharp teeth, and the teacher probes, "Why do you think they have such sharp teeth?"

One child answers, "To eat!"

"Ah," the teacher says with a twinkle in her eye, "What do they eat, anyway? Spaghetti?"

"No!" the kids scream back.

After introducing the word "predator," the teacher passes around photographs of alligators and their prey. She asks the kids to stand up and stretch their arms out, raising one high and one low then snapping them together. The kids giggle as they pretend to chomp one another. Later, they measure whether an alligator is big enough to cover their circle-time rug. As they unravel a piece of string cut to an alligator's average length, the children exclaim, "Alligators are huge!"



Even without the benefit of decades of developmental research, the reader can spot the advantages of Classroom Two. In this classroom, the teacher is able to move beyond the simple didactic lesson that “A” stands for alligator. By engaging the students in fun, developmentally appropriate activities and discussions, she is able to get the students not just thinking about the letter “A,” but also about such abstract concepts as size, about the meaning of the word “predator,” and maybe even a bit about the concept of ecosystem. But this lesson is not just better on its face. Reading research, for example, shows that children will have a much easier time learning to read and, more importantly, *comprehending* what they read, when they already have a base of vocabulary and content knowledge to lean on. It’s pretty hard for an elementary school student to understand a passage about predators if he has never even heard the word “predator” before and doesn’t know what one is. Years of cognitive science show the importance of giving a child early and repeated interactions with words and concepts, enabling them to become part of a child’s long-term memory so that the brain can easily call upon those memories when introduced to something new.

Sadly, Classroom Two is not the norm in today’s early childhood programs for disadvantaged children. This is true whether children are in Head Start programs, state-funded pre-K, subsidized child care, or parent-funded preschool. Studies of programs around the country have shown that while teachers typically provide a warm and emotionally supportive climate, the quality of what they teach—and how it’s taught—is mediocre at best.

We must address this disconnect between our high expectations for early childhood programs and the reality of what children are experiencing if we want to help poor children escape poverty. It’s time for a change in mindset. For years, children have been treated to a social services model that emphasizes

health, safety, socialization, and nutrition. The end result: Safe and nutritious holding tanks. This is obviously not good enough. Early childhood classrooms need to have the look and feel of the alligator lesson provided by the teacher in Classroom Two, with interactions that help develop children’s language, cognitive, and social skills. Although these programs should, of course, remain tightly coordinated with social services, our expectations can’t end there. After all, if early education programs are going to enable poor children to compete with more affluent children, they must do *more*, not less, to level the playing field. A true anti-poverty system of education must start as soon as women are pregnant and continue until children are reading proficiently and are armed with the skills needed to learn on their own.

For the remainder of this article, I will outline how we might get there. A progressive and proactive early education system for disadvantaged children should be built around two essential principles: 1) the use of pedagogy that promotes cognitive development, expanding children’s use of language and providing a solid base of content knowledge, and 2) a seamless continuity of services—starting at birth and extending through the third grade—that buttresses learning and development.

This will take money. But some new investments are on the horizon. Despite the recession, most states with pre-K programs have so far avoided devastating cuts. A recent report from the advocacy group Pre-K Now showed that pre-K funding ticked up by 1 percent in the 2010 fiscal year. A one-time infusion of funding from the stimulus bill is now making its way to Head Start and child care centers, with enough funding to bring 55,000 additional families into Early Head Start, a program for babies, toddlers, and their mothers. A \$750 million fund to support home-visitation programs for new mothers and their babies will probably be passed as part of health care reform, if and when

that becomes law. And legislation currently moving through Congress as part of the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act would provide an additional \$1-billion-a-year for an Early Learning Challenge Fund to help coordinate and improve the quality of early childhood programs.

It would be a mistake to assume that more money and attention are magic bullets that make early education work for low-income youth. It is not as if children's readiness for school—and therefore their chances at academic and career success—will get an automatic lift once the fairy dust of more federal and state funding is sprinkled across the existing system. "This isn't just about keeping an eye on our children," President Obama said in a major education speech in March 2009. "It's about educating them." In asking how we might do just that, let's recap how we wound up with the present early childhood system.

The Existing Landscape

The federal government started focusing on early childhood programs for poor children during President Johnson's War on Poverty, launching Head Start in 1965. The program provides free preschool to children in families at or below the federal poverty line. Approximately 920,000 three- and four-year-olds attend, and waiting lists are common in many cities. But while child advocates have always applauded Head Start, until recently there's been little proof that Head Start children make larger gains in their social and cognitive development than those who do not attend. So in 1998, Congress authorized a study comparing Head Start children with those who, though they were qualified, did not get into the program. The study analyzed how children are doing one year after Head Start as well as after kindergarten and first grade. It found that the Head Start children were more prepared for kindergarten than the control group, scoring higher on some, though not all, indicators of cognitive and social-emotional development. But it also found that by the end of first grade, there was little difference between the two groups.

These results have given pause to some policymakers who want more evidence that taxpayer dollars are being put to good use. Even the modest gains in kindergarten readiness have provided ammunition to some who believe that the government shouldn't be spending money on early learning experiences

that they believe families should provide on their own.

In 1998 and 2007, new laws were passed with the objective of increasing the number of Head Start teachers with post-secondary degrees. Over the same period, the program struggled with flat funding during the Bush administrations, receiving around \$6.8 billion a year over the past several years. In 2009, the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act provided \$2 billion in extra Head Start funds, and the fiscal year 2010 appropriations bills currently in Congress would also boost Head Start funding. Many advocates and researchers argue that the current levels of funding are inadequate, given that demand for Head Start programs is unmet, many programs are only half-day, many teachers and staff are poorly paid, and the newfound interest in generating (and documenting) cognitive and academic gains requires new investments.

Meanwhile, from the early- to mid-2000s, states launched their own sets of programs for preschoolers, most of which focused on getting them ready for school. Thirty-eight states now have what is called "state-funded pre-K" that provides a free half or full day of instruction in public schools or community-based centers. These programs vary greatly, but many serve families with incomes significantly higher than the poverty threshold, and some are available to every child, regardless of family income. Today, state pre-K programs serve more than 1.1 million children, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research.

The combination of Head Start, state-funded pre-K, and other subsidized child care centers has led to a system characterized by a hodgepodge of disconnected services. And the system is still far from being universal. Only about four-fifths of four-year-olds are in some kind of regular child care arrangement, according to the Census Bureau, and of those, it's unclear how many offer much more than babysitting. It has only been over the past few years that leaders of state pre-K and Head Start programs started to seriously consider integrating their services. Recently, advocates of child care subsidies have voiced a call for better coordination and quality of child care services as well. High-quality child care can become an important element of early education by providing wrap around services helping parents whose jobs do not allow them to pick up children at 3 or 4 p.m., when many full-day pre-K programs end.

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The Way Forward

Even if Head Start, state-funded pre-K, and child care services were better connected, there is obviously no guarantee that they would provide anything like the experiences offered by Classroom Two. To the chagrin of many child development experts, children seem to be more likely to receive something like the thinner learning experience offered by Classroom One. Pre-literacy instruction in preschool is important, but introducing children to letters and print is only one component of preparing children to read. We need a system based on the principles of cognitive development and seamless integration. If these two reforms were taken truly seriously, early education could become a real poverty-killer.

Improving Pedagogy

Research from leading reading experts has shown that children need frequent oral language interactions, coupled with frequent introduction to new vocabulary words, if they are going to have any luck in comprehending the books they'll be asked to read by second, third, and fourth grades.

To deliver something like that second alligator lesson, a teacher needs to be equipped with a rich knowledge base, a strong command of vocabulary and language, and a sound understanding of child development. The successful teacher will often, though not always, have a bachelor's degree and will receive training on how to engage children based on new findings in cognitive and social science.

Poor children do exceedingly well if they are fortunate enough to attend centers with such well-prepared teachers. High-profile studies have found that these children need fewer special education services, do better in school, and engage in less crime (as indexed by crime records), all of which lead to reduced costs to society. A 40-year study of the Perry HighScope program in Ypsilanti, Michigan, revealed that it delivered \$8.74 in benefits for every dollar spent. A similar study showed that the Child-Parent Centers in Chicago returned \$10 for every dollar spent. For the Abecedarian program in North Carolina, the return was \$3.78. All of these programs provided the high-quality, well-prepared teachers necessary for leading the exciting lessons offered in our hypothetical Classroom Two.

In Head Start, analyses of data from the Congress-commissioned Impact Study

show returns in line with or slightly greater than \$1 for every dollar invested. Similar data does not exist for many state pre-K programs, and though some have shown that children arrive in kindergarten better prepared, quality varies greatly across the nation. A 2005 study of pre-K programs across 11 states showed classrooms to be, on average, of low-to-moderate quality. Researchers scored interactions between teachers and children, finding them to be in the mid-range for quality. And when it came to “instructional climate”—a measure of the quantity and quality of concepts taught, as well as how teachers provided feedback to spur more learning—scores dwelled around 2, the lower end of the 1-to-7 scale that researchers used.

And so we arrive at one of the hardest nuts to crack in early childhood policy: How do we improve this “instructional climate”? First, education schools and teacher preparation programs will need to greatly expand and improve their offerings, and policymakers must reward programs that hire teachers with strong content knowledge, language skills, and the know-how to introduce new concepts in ways that recognize children's stages of development.

Recruiting and retaining these teachers and caregivers are major challenges. The average salary of a Head Start teacher with a bachelor's degree is about \$27,000 a year. It's no wonder that young adults with B.A. degrees decide to work in the elementary grades instead of in pre-K programs. To recruit better teachers, early learning centers will have to pay them what they would receive in the public schools. And yet only a handful of places—such as the state of Oklahoma and some districts in New Jersey—have mustered the political will (in Oklahoma's

case) or the legal authority (as in the New Jersey Supreme Court's Abbott decision) to increase funding to that level. It's worth noting that a high-quality, random-assignment study of pre-K in Tulsa, Oklahoma, showed quite staggering improvements in children's outcomes under its enriched program. There is good reason to believe that focusing on improved teaching could deliver much bang for the taxpayer's buck.

A Seamless System

But we get only halfway to a high-quality early education system by ramping up teaching. The history of Head Start gives us yet another lesson: Starting children at age four is starting too late. Science has shown how much an unhealthy environment can negatively affect children's development, even in the

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womb. That's why in 1995, Early Head Start was established to provide support services to pregnant women and their babies, up to age three.

By the same token, halting interventions at age five is stopping too soon. When children move from high-quality learning environments to low-performing elementary schools, research shows that the pace of their social and cognitive development starts to slow. "It is magical thinking to expect that if we intervene in the early years, no further help will be needed by children in the elementary school years and beyond," wrote Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, a prominent psychologist at Columbia University, in a widely cited paper on early childhood education.

The good news is that experts in the field, including some federal policymakers, understand this. The new vision is to create a "birth-to-eight" network—a system of interlocking intervention services that build on existing programs serving pregnant women, babies, toddlers, preschool-age children, and elementary school students. This network will require data systems that share information on children's well-being and prior experiences, connecting them seamlessly to databases in public schools. It will force funding streams to be blended and eligibility parameters to be consistent across programs. It will require intense coordination between health departments and education departments—at both the state and local level—as well as between nonprofit organizations and public school systems. These requirements may seem daunting, but in fact we are already moving, if fitfully, toward just such a system.

The Obama administration has proposed a new competitive grant program that would reward states that have already taken steps to build these networks or that show a commitment to doing so. Called the Early Learning Challenge Fund, the program is part of a larger bill, the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act, that has been passed by the House and is expected to be taken up by the Senate this winter. It would distribute \$1 billion a year to help states increase the number of disadvantaged children in high-quality early care and education programs, from birth to age five. An emphasis on high-quality environments pervades the legislation's language.

A remaining step—one that has not been fully articulated in many policies and needs more attention—is to stretch that quality network further into the primary grades. Studies by Robert C. Pianta, Dean of the Curry School of Education at

the University of Virginia, show that elementary classrooms lack quality interactions as much as those for three- and four-year-olds. Research points to the need for what is called "the PreK-3rd approach," a strategy that provides high-quality early learning opportunities to every child before they arrive in kindergarten; that aligns standards, curricula, and assessments between the public schools and pre-K settings; and that provides continuous professional development and shared learning opportunities to well-qualified teachers. Paying pre-K teachers wages that are comparable to elementary school teachers would help ensure that all of these teachers feel like the critical professionals they are.

Early Education from A to Z

This vision for early childhood intervention goes far beyond giving four-year-olds nutritious snacks and helping them identify the letters of the alphabet. It will not be easy. But if we could deliver a high-quality birth-to-eight system, just think about the potential for reducing poverty.

Imagine, for example, what might happen to a baby boy born to a mother who is poor, depressed, and on her own. She lives in a rough neighborhood. She is struggling to make ends meet. But now she receives free visits from a nurse who gives her tips on keeping her boy healthy and on controlling her temper on days when she's overwhelmed. She enrolls in Early Head Start. When her son turns three—full of "why" questions and fascinated by animals—he starts attending a high-quality pre-K/Head Start center, where he encounters Classroom Two's alligator lesson. In kindergarten, he receives the same caliber of instruction, and again in first grade, and again in second—each year building seamlessly on what he has learned the year before.

The little boy thrives. By third grade, he is reading chapter books and writing papers on veterinary science. His mother remains poor, struggling with family conflicts and on-and-off-again employment, but the boy's educational background has put him on a path toward college. By the time he is an adult, he will escape poverty. Not only that, but most of his neighborhood friends—all immersed in the same rich learning experiences from the day they were born—will too.

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