
The Role of Early Education in Bridging the Achievement Gap for Low-Income and English Language Learner Children

Almost 23 percent of children in California are living in poverty¹ and 37 percent in public schools speak a language other than English at home, a number that is expected to grow.² These numbers far exceed the national average of 18 percent and 22 percent, respectively. It is also an undisputed fact that low-income and ELL students underperform their peers academically³, greatly reducing the probability that they will reach similar earning levels. Research has shown that by the time a child enters kindergarten, this gap is already present and will persist. California's K-12 public education system alone cannot level the playing field for its students. Research has proven that the only way to do this is to intervene in the earliest years.^{4,5} For California to bridge the achievement gap between low-income and ELL students and the rest of the population, increased access to early education for these children during the early years is essential.

Numerous studies have shown that underprivileged and ELL children who attend a preschool or pre-kindergarten program perform significantly better in elementary school than their peers who did not attend an early-childhood education program. For example, the Stanford Graduate School of Education's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities conducted a study that found that a group of low-income and ELL children that attended a public preschool program in San Mateo County scored as well and sometimes better than their more advantaged peers, who mostly attended private preschools. This targeted group would normally not have access to quality preschool, and tends to score much lower on academic tests.⁶

With the high cost of child care and limited state subsidies, it is difficult and unlikely that low-income children will attend a high-quality early learning program. Many studies have shown how beneficial these programs are for low-income children. The Cecil J. Picard Center for Child Development and Lifelong Learning found that in a group of students who attended an early childhood development program, the non-white students living in poverty benefited

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1. U.S. Census Bureau. (2011). Selected Economic Characteristics 2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_11_1YR_DPO3&prodType=table>.
 2. California Department of Education. (2012). Facts about English learners in California. *CalEd Facts*. <<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/cb/cefelfacts.asp?print=yes>>.
 3. "How Far Behind in Math and Reading are English Language Learners?" *Pew Research Hispanic Center*. Pew Research Center. 6 June 2007. Web. 21 May 2013. <<http://www.pewhispanic.org/2007/06/06/ii-introduction-7/>>.
 4. "Investments in Education May Be Misdirected." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company. 2 April 2013. Web. 21 May 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/03/business/studies-highlight-benefits-of-early-education.html?ref=eduardoport&r=1&>>.
 5. "Early Language Lessons to Close the New Achievement Gap." *Al Jazeera*. Web. 29 April 2013. 21 May 2013. <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/04/201342865548635535.html>>.
 6. "Preschool Program Bridges the Achievement Gap, Study Shows." *Phys.org*. 15 April 2013. Web. 21 May 2013. <<http://phys.org/news/2013-04-preschool-bridges-gap.html>>.

significantly when tested in elementary school, whereas the white children and children not living in poverty scored the same as the control group. The underprivileged students had lower rates of retention and special education classification, and higher test grades.⁷ A similar study conducted by the Arkansas Research Center found that low-income students who attended a pre-kindergarten program scored significantly better on academic tests than their underprivileged counterparts who did not attend the program. These results, however, were not seen between the two groups of economically advantaged students.⁸ Early education clearly helps low-income children the most, bringing them closer to the level of their peers; however, these are the children who are least likely to attend these programs.

Research has shown that bilingual children benefit the most when they attend an early education program that uses both their home language and English.⁹ If they are exposed to English only, their overall literacy declines, and if they are not exposed to English they will not have the necessary knowledge of the language to succeed in Kindergarten. By fourth grade, the achievement gap between ELL students and their peers is greater than between students on the free and reduced-price lunch program and their peers.¹⁰ With the number of children in California who speak a language other than English at home so high, and on the rise, there must be programs in place to ensure their preparedness for school.

Increased efforts to support English language learners and low-income children in elementary school, while well-intentioned, are missing the most formative and impactful years. Many children already have two years of school behind them when they enter kindergarten, and if these at-risk children are not targeted until elementary school, the chances of them catching up are slim. The most efficient way to help these children have the same chances in life that their more advantaged peers have, is to invest in them before they are five-years-old. Income equality is passed down generation to generation at a much higher rate in the U.S. than other advanced nations, and it is no coincidence that it also spends a much lower percentage of their funding for children on young children.¹¹ With the majority of brain development occurring before age five,¹² this is undoubtedly the most vital time to invest in the children who need it the most.

Additional Resources:

Kidsdata.org, a program of Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health: www.kidsdata.org
National Association for the Education of Young Children: www.NAEYC.org

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7. "Study Shows Pre-K Gains Continue Into Elementary Years." *The Advertiser*. Gannett. 7 May 2013. Web. 21 May 2013. <<http://www.theadvertiser.com/article/20130507/NEWS01/130507009/Study-shows-Pre-K-gains-continue-into-elementary-years?gcheck=1>>.
 8. "Pre-K Can Help Disadvantaged Students, Studies Show." *Talk Business Arkansas*. 10 May 2013. Web. 21 May 2013. <<http://talkbusiness.net/2013/05/pre-k-can-help-disadvantaged-students-studies-show/>>.
 9. "Dual Language in Early Education Best for Youngest ELLs, Report Says." *Education Week*. 14 May 2013. Web. 21 May 2013. <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2013/05/dual_language_in_early_educati.html>.
 10. "Early Language Lessons to Close the New Achievement Gap." *Al Jazeera*. Web. 29 April 2013. 21 May 2013. <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/04/201342865548635535.html>>.
 11. "Investments in Education May Be Misdirected." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company. 2 April 2013. Web. 21 May 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/03/business/studies-highlight-benefits-of-early-education.html?ref=eduardoporter&_r=1&>.
 12. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. 2000, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

New America Foundation *Growing Research Consensus on Effective Strategies for Dual Language Instruction in Early*

Childhood(http://earlyed.newamerica.net/blogposts/2013/growing_research_consensus_on_effective_strategies_for_dual_language_instruction_in_e)