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A Clear Lens: A Discussion of the Importance of Early Childhood Education Programs in Lower Socioeconomic Communities

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Abstract

Early childhood education is a critical learning phase for young learners. Preschool-aged children experience a large percentage of their growth and development between birth – six years of age (Burger, 2010). Achievement gaps arrive when young children from poverty-stricken communities are not exposed to the same or similar learning experiences as their middle-upper class counterparts. Early childhood education programs, such as Head Start, provide young learners with opportunities for emotional, psychological, and behavioral growth, preparing them to perform better when they enter K-12 education institutions. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of investing in early childhood education programs and how they have a significant impact on learning and, ultimately, economic growth.

Keywords (6 max): Early childhood education, child development

Introduction

Many children under the age of five suffer from poverty, poor health, and nutrition problems. In a world where education is known to be a key factor for socioeconomic advancement, there is still only exist optional education practices for children under the age of 6. Thus, over 35% of young children who enter Kindergarten are not prepared to succeed in school (Rogers, Ma, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2019). Many enter Kindergarten already lagging behind their middle to upper class counterparts. Early education programs are known to address these educational and developmental problems, yet they are not mandatory and are not available to all young children.

There is an increase in demand for early learning and childcare facilities, that can contribute to a positive learning environment for young children. Children develop skills in early learning that will assist them in academics throughout their educational years. Early childhood education has shown to be a great investment in education. It's shown to have a positive impact on disadvantage children's educational outcomes. It improves academic and cognitive skills in adolescents that improves students test scores, which led to increasing educational success through secondary schooling and beyond. We estimate that one extra year in ECE leads to a nearly 30.8%-point increase in verbal conversation scores and a 21.8%-point increase in math test scores (Rogers, Ma, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2019).

Research has shown that children's have positive outcomes in early childhood education, and it has a significant impact on family wealth, region, ethnicity, and educational cognitive. Early childhood and care programs focus on all children and ensuring they're on developmental level. ECE strives to ensure that all children regardless of their social background are prepared to successfully start school.

Thus, expenditures on early childhood education programs constitute worthy social investments in the human capital of children (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013).

Early Childhood Education programs and the effect on early learners

Early childhood education (ECE) programs provide high quality learning for young children. They are ways of improving school readiness of young children and enabling them to take full advantage of the K-12 benefits of educational investment (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013). Through taking advantage of existing program focused on low-income minority communities, early childhood learners can be prepared to enter K-12 institutions. It is imperative that children start school ready to succeed. Duncan and Magnuson (2013) observed that low socioeconomic status (SES) children scored lower than high SES children in reading, math, and attention skills upon entering kindergarten. Given the significance of achievement skills in determining educational success, income disparities in children have impacted their reading and math achievement (Burger, 2010). Growing up in poor families has resulted in a greater decrease in children completing school compared to their more affluent peers. (Burger, 2010).

Children who participate in early childhood and care programs will have equal access to education. Without controlling for any covariates, students who attend ECE programs had higher rates of attending magnet schools than those who did not (Kitchens, Gormley, & Anderson, 2020). Statistic shows that 5% of Hispanic students, 10% of Black and Native American students that attend ECE programs attended middle magnet schools (Kitchens, Gormley, & Anderson, 2020). Research also suggests that children who successfully transitioned from an ECE program to kindergarten possess multiple skills including academic, social, and emotional abilities that allow them to meet the demands of the kindergarten classroom (Jarrett, & Coba-Rodriguez, 2018).

Children who are at risk of having low developmental learning skills, because of economic disadvantages, develop greater benefits from skills built in high-quality ECE programs (Celebioglu Morkoc, & Aktan Acar, 2014). Celebioglu Morkoc and Aktan Acar (2014) found that high quality early childhood learning environments provide a respectable environment for a child's physical, mental, and social necessities. Through these early learning environments, children can develop verbal skills rapidly, having an increased interest in books and writing at an early age (Celebioglu Morkoc, & Aktan Acar, 2014).

During Piaget's preoperational stage, typically beginning at age two, children are able to grasp small and simple concepts (Burger, 2010). During this heightened time of learning, it is very important to enhance learning, building on the inquisitiveness of a child's existing learning skills. Early childcare education has a positive influence on children's learning through providing them with a favorable start entering K-12 learning environments while preventing possibilities such as school failure, grade retention, or special education needs (Burger, 2010). Research also suggests various intervention strategies to support the development of at-risk children which includes center-based intervention approaches which lead to normal development in areas including early reading skills, reductions in aggressive behavior, solutions to anxiety difficulties, and preschool child obesity (Celebioglu Morkoc, & Aktan Acar, 2014).

Early learning adaptation

Children who do not learn successfully in the early years of life often struggle to adapt to school. They frequently exhibit deficiencies in cognitive, language, social, and motor development skills. (Celebioglu Morkoc, & Aktan Acar, 2014). Many seem to struggle with self-care and communication. Early intervention programs aim to close the gap in children who are at risk of developing developmental delays because of property and other negative environmental factors. Important economic and social benefits for children, families and the society are provided by effective early intervention programs (Celebioglu Morkoc, & Aktan Acar, 2014).

Prior research has shown that early childhood education is effective at improving cognitive and academic outcomes later in life for several factors related to educational development and equity (Rogers, Ma, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2019). It was discovered that establishing teacher-student relationships before beginning primary school can help with the psychological challenges associated with the start of formal education, thereby improving academic performance later (Rogers, Ma, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2019). These relationships have been proven to positively effect reading and math achievement and improve student retention (Barnett, 2011).

Early childhood education programs can give children opportunities to practice new behaviors such as doing homework, sitting at a table, going to cubicles, and eating self-service meals (Jarrett, & Coba-Rodriguez, 2018). These programs also provide young children the opportunity to learn self-sufficiency, independence, and responsibility. In addition to providing strategies for children with behavioral issues and academic challenges, parents whose children attend ECE programs can receive advice and assurance that their children will be ready for kindergarten (Jarrett, & Coba-Rodriguez, 2018).

What's next?

The goal of early learning programs is to allow children to develop skills that they will use throughout their educational careers (Burger, 2010). There has been an increase in demand for childcare facilities that can contribute to positive learning environments for young children. Early childcare advocates must continue to prioritize garnering support for the early child. This can be justified by the claim that setting strong foundations for learning begins in the earliest years of life (Burger, 2010). Early childcare professionals, academics, and administrators must also focus on developing and spreading early intervention programs through organizations which support high-quality early education for both children and families, in line with the needs in the various regions (Celebioglu Morkoc, & Aktan Acar, 2014). Targeted pre-K programs promote equal educational opportunity explicitly by directing funds to at-risk students, including students of color and students from low-income households (Kitchens, Gormley, & Anderson, 2020). Funding these types of early learning centers allow children to be prepared for K-12 school environments. Investing in early childhood education programs in the more disadvantaged areas may be an effective way to overcome environment and socioeconomic issues (Kitchens, Gormley, & Anderson, 2020).

The effectiveness of ECE programs has been shown to have a positive impact and a successful outcome on young children. High quality schools have the potential to build on early learning gains by offering thousands of students every year a challenging but stimulating school environment that encourages steady progress towards academic gains (Kitchens, Gormley, & Anderson, 2020).

Conclusion

It is critical to provide young children with a stimulating learning environment that will aid in their development throughout their lives. Birth to three years of age is a significant developmental stage in which children learn to apply their knowledge and skills. Disadvantaged children participating in high quality early childhood education programs demonstrate long-term benefits in learning outcomes, cognitive development, social behavior, economic productivity, and health risk behaviors (Baker-Henningham, 2014). Early childhood education programs also increase school achievement, reduce school dropouts and improved children classroom behaviors (Baker-Henningham, 2014). The cognitive achievement gap decreases when young children experience opportunities to learn during their early years. Early childhood education is a lifelong achievement related to educational development inequity. Early learning has a highly significant impact on adolescence educational outcomes, and promote a positive impact on family wealth, region, ethnicity, and children's cognitive outcomes.

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