Universal Preschool – Developmentalists Enter the Fray

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The rich alchemy of hunch and evidence has long shaped causal accounts of what social contexts and psychological experiences spur healthy child development. But when it comes to the controversial notion of state-run universal preschool, respected developmentalists are drifting onto thin ice.

Jean Piaget, writing from the Sorbonne in 1957 and drawing from Johann Comenius, the 17th century philosopher, argued that ‘if the child is really a being in the process of spontaneous development, then individual study, independent exercises, and the transformation of capacities with age are possible’ [Piaget, 1967, p. 15].

Then, Piaget couldn’t resist contrasting his child-centered theory with the school’s mechanical notion of growth, simply focusing on ‘verbal and mnemonic transmission of adult knowledge through the teacher’s words to the pupil’s mind’ [Piaget, 1967, p. 15]. He was prophetic in the light of No Child Left Behind and enforced didactics now found in many contemporary public schools.

Yet the casual blending of evidence on children’s growth with claims about institutions that aim to serve them can be risky. Witness how several respected developmentalists have jumped on the universal preschool bandwagon, including stellar thinkers like Deborah Stipek, Ruby Takanishi, and Ed Zigler. They have argued that the government should provide free preschool for all children, rather than focusing public dollars on poor children, the dominating priority over the past half-century.

These and fellow scholars have been enlisted by well-heeled foundations to write op-eds and testify before legislative committees, that is, to lend legitimacy to a singular policy. Their heartfelt aims are virtuous. Indeed, the early childhood movement owes much to the work of developmentalists and allied social scientists, harking back to work of Arnold Gessell, Robert Hess, and Prof. Zigler – prompting the creation of Head Start.

But the policy question today is no longer whether public action is desirable in lifting the early growth of young children, age 0–5, the issue is *which children* significantly benefit and through *what kinds* of preschool organizations. And the scientific question of *how* young children benefit from preschool classrooms – via what social and motivational processes – remains vastly undertheorized, beyond the

foundational work of Carollee Howes [Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992], Robert Pianta [2005], and Prof. Stipek [2004].

Universal preschool advocates have claimed that this human scale institution can benefit all children. The past 40 years of work have demonstrated sustained benefits for children from poor African American families. Yet three national studies have now shown that effect sizes for children from middle-class families are small, and discernible gains largely fade out by the end of elementary school [for a review, see Fuller, 2007]. Four fifths of children from upper middle-class families already attend preschool. So, universal financing would largely provide relief for parents who can afford to pay.

Proponents also claim that programs situated in public schools would be more effective than those in nonprofit organizations, where most 4-year-olds now attend preschool. It makes for a clever political strategy as K-12 educators see the potential for new funding. But no careful study has substantiated the claim, in part because state quality regulations apply equally to school- and community-based programs. President Obama's massive expansion of Head Start, contained within his economic stimulus package, opts to support local nonprofits, not schools.

Advocates have also borrowed symbols of program quality from the K-12 sector. Many argue that requiring preschool teachers to obtain a bachelor's degree will lend higher status to the profession and lift children's growth curves. But the latter claim was disconfirmed by a team led by UNC's Diane Early [2007], finding a weak and inconsistent association between the bachelor's degree and child outcomes, examined across seven national data sets.

I am not suggesting that scholars shy away from engaging important policy debates. Much of my career has been aimed at enriching civic discussion and policy making. But we should be crystal clear on when we speak from evidence and when we are advancing hunches about how institutions should work for a diverse range of young children. Otherwise, we risk simply advancing ideals and philosophical claims. There is no shortage of such advocates in the policy world.

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