For early childhood development, the U.S. should look south [1]

Author: Sanchez, Gabriel Zinny
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EXCERPTS:

In the ongoing debate over education reform in the United States, a new issue has taken center stage in the weeks since President Obama included it in his most recent State of the Union address: early childhood development, and the benefits of expanding preschool and other early education options. And while this is not historically an area in which the U.S. has seen much success, it may be the case that finding the best examples from which to learn will mean looking south, to the experiments undertaken in Mexico and Brazil.

The evidence is strong that beginning education earlier has outsized effects on students' lifetime learning -- and thus, earning -- abilities. As President Obama put it, "study after study shows that the earlier a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road... For poor kids who need help the most, this lack of access to preschool education can shadow them for the rest of their lives." Indeed, Brookings estimates that high quality universal preschool could add $2 trillion to annual U.S. GDP for a cost of $59 billion.

Unfortunately, this is not an area in which the U.S. has historically had much success, despite a number of efforts. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which serves as a clearinghouse of statistical information for the world's developed countries, the U.S. ranks 28th out of 38 countries in terms of the number of four year olds attending preschool. And according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the situation in the U.S. is even worse for minorities: Latino children of 3-5 years attend preschool at a rate of 56 percent, compared to 67 percent for white students of the same age. The results can be seen down the road, as Latinos have lower test scores and higher high school dropout rates than the average American -- what is known as the achievement gap.

Even though there has existed for some time now a consensus among most scholars and policymakers regarding the importance of early education -- or what is more broadly referred to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) -- the programs that have been pursued have achieved lackluster results at best. President Obama may have renewed national attention to this issue with his State of the Union, but the US has had a program focused on early childhood development since the 1960s -- "Head Start," begun in 1965, under the leadership of President Lyndon Johnson and his expansive new "war on poverty."

Recent research has called into question Head Start's effectiveness. Currently, as Grover Whitehurst of Brookings points out, the program spends about $8,000 per child per year for each of its one million participants, compared with about $700 per child per year for the roughly 21 million disadvantaged children in the rest of the system. Despite this funding differential, the Department of Health and Human Services' Head Start Impact Study -- one of the most involved and rigorous federal performance studies ever carried out -- found that Head Start "does not improve the school readiness of children from low income families." While there is a small positive impact on performance for the duration of the Head Start program, that boost does not persist through later stages of schooling.

This suggests that not all early childhood programs are created equal -- and that spending a lot of money is not a guarantee of lasting success. While there is a broad consensus among both practitioners and policy wonks that ECEC programs are critical, there is less agreement as to how to get there. How can programs like Head Start be improved?

One possible answer, which may surprise those in the U.S., is that the president may find answers by looking south, to Mexico and Brazil. Both of these countries, even while dealing with child poverty more dire than that of the U.S., have implemented successful childhood development programs. Mexico's Oportunidades, for example, provides poor families with conditional cash transfers (CCTs) based on children attending classes and regular health clinic visits. Importantly, while it begins with preschool, the educational aspect of the program continues through high school. As a result, children who participate in the program have more balanced diet, fewer illnesses, and higher school enrollment -- 20 percent more for girls and 10 percent more for boys.

Brazil's Bolsa Familia operates on the same principle, seeking to improve the overall human development of the poorest children with targeted cash payments dependent on school attendance and health care visits. Currently, the program benefits nearly 14 million families, and is credited with helping reduce the number of people in extreme poverty from 14 percent to 4.2 percent over the past decade.

As President Obama continues to sell his plan for universal preschool, the devil will be in the details -- the amount of responsibility and accountability devolved to the states, the income brackets that will qualify for inclusion, teacher credentials and evaluation, and the role of the private sector. As the debate continues, however, the examples of Mexico and Brazil should teach us the importance of a holistic approach to early development: one that that addresses health and nutrition as well as classroom time - and that continues to support children's development beyond just preschool.

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