

A much-needed pre-k primer ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

At first glance, the new poll results Gallup released last week on early childhood and higher education seem pretty straightforward. Reported with the headline "Americans Buy Free Pre-K; Split on Tuition-Free College," the poll found that 59 percent of Americans now support free early childhood programs while less than half (47 percent) support free college tuition.

But a closer look behind Gallup's "Free Pre-K" headline reveals something peculiar: The poll didn't ask about pre-K. It asked about "child care and pre-kindergarten programs," encompassing a range of programs for children from birth to age 5. So in fact, Gallup has no idea if 59 percent of Americans support public pre-K, because their poll didn't ask that question.

This isn't the first time Gallup has gotten its headlines and questions confused in polls on early childhood. In 2014, it reported poll findings that "70% Favor Federal Funds To Expand Pre-K Education," concluding: "The public seems to agree with Obama's push for expanding preschool education in more areas of the country." A subsequent U.S. News & World Report article entitled "Americans Favor Federal Support of Pre-K" cited the poll as public backing of Obama's proposal to "make high-quality pre-K available to every 4-year-old," adding an enthusiastic comment from Randi Weingarten, president of one of the two national teachers unions, reiterating broad support for adding pre-K to the nation's schools.

But just like the 2016 version, the 2014 poll didn't ask respondents even one question about pre-K. What it did ask them was their views on "high-quality preschool programs," which include child care, home visiting and other early education programs for children from birth to age 5.

A third example of this phenomenon occurred around a bipartisan national poll conducted last fall for the First Five Years Fund, an early childhood education advocacy group, which found that a large majority of voters from across the political spectrum view children's first five years as crucial to their development and are broadly supportive of improving access to high quality early childhood programs. The Atlantic ran an article on the poll entitled "The Bipartisan Appeal of Pre-K," and Politico covered it with the headline "Poll Finds Pre-K Is Top Priority." A blog posted on DC think tank New America's website highlighted the poll's release, reporting that "76 percent of voters express support for a proposal that would provide 10 billion federal dollars per year for 10 years in state grants to provide low- and middle-income four-year-olds with access to high quality pre-K programs."

But the poll found nothing about pre-K whatsoever – much less a \$10 billion federal proposal to expand it. The poll's questions didn't mention pre-K once. What the poll did find was that 88 percent of respondents think that "families often need two incomes to get by and many single parents are working more than one job," so "access to quality early childhood education is not a luxury, but a need for many families." Eighty percent agreed that high-quality early learning programs should be available to infants and toddlers to give them a strong start on developing school-ready knowledge and social skills. And over three-fourths supported increasing federal investment to help states and local communities provide better access to high-quality early childhood programs for low- and moderate-income families.

What's going on? While this could seem like a small matter, it reflects a lack of clarity in early education advocacy that's becoming pervasive. In fact, the notable lexical imprecision seems to be associated with an unfortunate and growing politicization of the early education field. As an Atlantic article on "The Politics of Pre-K" noted recently, "[R]arely do politicians who've declared early education a top priority say they want to expand access to preschool. It's all about the single year that precedes kindergarten: pre-K."

In a kind of verbal slight-of-hand, advocates start by stressing the crucial period of brain development from birth to age 3, then move on to the importance of providing high quality preschool programs to disadvantaged kids from birth to 5 – then before you know it, they're concluding that sending all 4-year-olds to school is essential to the nation's future.

As early childhood moves into the spotlight, it's even more important that the public and policymakers understand specifically what insiders are – and are not – talking about. So here's a brief primer as a starting point: The term "pre-K" refers to school for 4-year-olds in the year that precedes kindergarten. "Universal pre-K" means pre-K that's free to everyone regardless of income, and "targeted" means pre-K that's free just for low-income families. "Preschool" is most often used as a synonym for pre-K. "Child care" generally means care for

children – in a home or a center – while parents are working, serving children from infancy to kindergarten entry. "Early childhood education" and "early learning" are usually used as umbrella terms for all programs for children from birth to age 5.

Early childhood programs vary greatly in purpose, design and results, for both children and their families, as a colleague and I discuss in our recent report on leading programs. Yet the terms describing very different kinds of programs are all too often used interchangeably – and, increasingly, to promote the addition of a pre-K grade to the K-12 public schools.

This now-common obfuscation brings to mind Alice's memorable conversation with Humpty Dumpty in "Through the Looking Glass," Louis Carroll's masterpiece of literary nonsense:

"'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'"

"'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'"

The clear answer is: You shouldn't be trying to.

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Region: United States [3]

Tags: election [4]

social policies and programs [5]

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