SocioEconomically Diverse Students/Classrooms and Education Outcomes

Race and class-based achievement gaps have been a challenge in American schools for decades. The notion that mixed race and mixed class education settings will improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students was the basis of desegregation policies starting in the 1970s.

Researchers have examined the race, class mix, and social learning environments for many levels of education including college and university classrooms (Hurtado, 2001; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund & Parente, 2001), middle schools (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), and elementary school (Risi, Gerhardstein, & Kistner, 2010) in relation to student outcomes. Some of the first research in 1966 came from Coleman and colleagues, who felt that classroom peers were the most powerful influence on children’s educational outcomes and that low SES children benefitted from being in mixed classrooms with higher SES students.

Since the mid-1960s, findings have been mixed, showing that higher income and white students have slightly poorer outcomes when their learning environments are diverse, while some outcomes are more positive for lower income and students of color. Most studies find that the quality of teaching and teacher autonomy are more important than classroom context when examining learning outcomes (Sanders, Wright & Horn, 1997). Some studies point out other important benefits of mixed learning environments including social growth (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002).

Fewer studies have focused on early childhood but scholars are beginning to explore whether the early learning environment offers another opportunity where mixed socioeconomic status (SES) can promote positive learning effects and address persistent achievement gaps. These researchers are also examining whether there is anything unique to the early childhood years or environments that make mixed classrooms more beneficial to children with low SES, particularly because many early childhood programs traditionally mix students of varying ability in classrooms. Some of this early research suggests the following:

Word Use and Literacy, Social-Emotional Development
Language development is one area where there appear to be benefits to mixed SES early childhood classrooms. This is based on the early research showing that low SES children tend to have smaller vocabularies than preschoolers from higher SES families. Schechter and Bye’s (2007) study found that low SES preschool children made significant gains in receptive language skills when in mixed SES classrooms compared to peers who were in more homogeneously low income classrooms. However, this was not true for children who were English language learners.
Bagby’s (2005) study of mixed SES preschool classrooms showed that behaviors were scored higher for comparison children in homogeneous SES classrooms than low income children in mixed classrooms. However, what this study revealed is the importance of instruction. The mixed and homogenous SES classrooms were taught very differently by teachers with very different approaches and styles. The authors stress that teacher interactions may be as, or more important than the SES composition of the classroom for the development of preschooler language and social-emotional development.

Mathematics
An international study of fourth and eighth graders revealed that the mathematics skills of low SES children in the United States appeared to have benefitted from being in mixed SES classrooms (Chudgar, Luschei, & Zhou, 2007). However, this did not extend to science skills and in some cases, children with very low SES did not benefit as much as their less-poor peers. The authors point out that in the United States, the tradition of grouping children by ability may confound some of the effects of SES in mixed classrooms.

Talking Points for Programs
~ Children may benefit from interacting with varying socio-economic status in early childhood.
~ Through their verbal interactions, young children from differing backgrounds can stimulate vocabulary development.
~ The behaviors of young children can be influenced by peers: mixing children from differing socio-economic status can be a positive influence on social-emotional development.
~ Teachers are one of the most important factors for child learning and development, no matter the classroom configuration.

Sources:
Hurtado, S. (2001). Linking diversity and educational purpose: How diversity affects the classroom environment and...


