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Educational Policy 2011 25: 240

DOI: 10.1177/0895904810387414

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25(1) 240–261

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DOI: 10.1177/0895904810387414

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Travis S. Wright¹

Abstract

Mirroring many of the same social and geographic inequities present in the K-12 educational system, the promise of early childhood education has been unfulfilled for many young children and their families. Social norms and funding structures, including the lack of universal, publicly funded high-quality preschool offerings, have served to perpetuate gender, class, economic, and racial inequity. The outcomes of these inequities are clearly manifested in the politics of universal preschool access and quality. In this policy analysis, the author discusses disparities in preschool access and quality, critiques social and political barriers to equitable distribution of preschool resources, and suggests several strategies for countering the current politics of class, race, gender, and geography in early childhood education. Findings from this analysis suggest that in order to provide high-quality early childhood education for all children, policy makers and advocates must address structural and attitudinal inequities.

Keywords

universal preschool, politics, race, gender, poverty, early childhood education

¹The George Washington University

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Travis Wright; GWU Graduate School of Education and Human Development; 2134 G St. NW, Suite 105; Washington, DC 20052.

email: tswright@gwu.edu

While research consistently demonstrates that high-quality early learning opportunities support academic achievement (Ramey, 1992; Ramey & Smith, 1977) and positive socioemotional development (Barnett, 1995; NICHD [National Institute of Child Health and Human Development] Early Child Care Research Network, 2000), access to such opportunities is uneven at best. Mirroring many of the same social and geographic inequities present in the K-12 educational system, the promise of early education has been unfulfilled for many young children and their families. Social norms and funding structures, including the lack of universal, publicly funded high-quality preschool offerings, have served to perpetuate gender, class, economic, and racial inequity. The outcomes of these inequities are clearly manifested in the politics of universal preschool access and quality.

In this article, I discuss disparities in preschool access and quality, critique social and political barriers to equitable distribution of preschool resources, and suggest several strategies for countering the current politics of class, race, gender, and geography in early childhood education. Findings from this analysis suggest that in order to provide high-quality early childhood education for all children, policy makers and advocates must address structural and attitudinal inequities.

A Critical Perspective

The politics of class, race, gender, and geography converge in the politics of universal preschool. I draw on a critical theoretical perspective to analyze the influence of these social structures undergirding the universal preschool debate. A critical perspective seeks to tease out sources of inequity and power imbalance in order to effect more equitable distribution of resources and success (Crotty, 2003). Consequently, in the context of this article, I pay particular attention to how the universal preschool debate may be reflecting hegemonic notions of race, class, and gender. As well, given their relative powerlessness in the debate, I am also mindful of the ways in which policy and applied interventions implicitly conceptualize children and childhood, and the implications of particular actions on young children and their development.

Disparities in Access

A multitude of public, private, and family-based options make the politics of access difficult to quantify. Similarly, a lack of consensus regarding what qualifies as preschool education further complicates an analysis of access and quality. While some researchers and advocates differentiate between child

care and early childhood education, others fail to draw such distinctions. In some states, early learning programs must have an approved curriculum in order to receive public preschool dollars, while in others, programs must only be licensed as child care providers (generally a distinction of safety conveyed by the local health department). This lack of consensus makes for a challenge when conducting comparisons across data sets. For this article, I will distinguish between these various definitions when relevant and possible.

Nevertheless, several consistent trends emerge when looking across studies. In the United States, participation in preschool education has increased steadily for many decades. In 2005, almost 70% of 4-year-olds were enrolled in preschool, up from less than 20% in 1965 (Barnett & Yarosz, 2007). Increasingly, preschool participation is viewed as essential by many middle-income families, with competition fierce for access to many high-quality programs.

However, preschool enrollment patterns have not been equal across all segments of the population, varying noticeably by race, socioeconomic status, and geography (Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004).

Latino children are the least likely of the three largest ethnic/racial groups in the United States to enroll in center-based programs. In 2006, 49% of Latino 3- to 5-year-olds attended center-based programs, compared with 60% of White children and 62% of Black children. Center-based enrollment for Black children fell from its peak of 73% in 1999 to 62% in 2006 (Child Trends, 2010). In 2003, only 33% of Native American children were enrolled in some type of preschool program (Child Trends, 2010).

Much disparity still exists between enrollment rates for low-income children and their middle- and upper-income counterparts. In 2006, 60% of 3- to 5-year-olds living above the poverty threshold were enrolled in such programs, compared with 51% of children living below the poverty threshold (Child Trends, 2010). In 2007, 84% of children living in homes with an average annual income between US\$75,000 and US\$100,000 were enrolled in formal preschool programs versus 55% of children living in homes with a family income between US\$20,000 and US\$30,000 (Barnett & Yarosz, 2007). Children whose mothers did not complete high school are half as likely to be enrolled in center-based care as children whose mothers graduated from college (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003). Yet this trend may not be intractable. When enrollment is examined as a function of income, preschool participation rates seem to suggest that public policies may increase enrollment among low-income families (Muenchow & Marsland, 2007). There is greater than a twofold increase in the number of children enrolled in state-subsidized preschool, compared to the rate of children enrollment a decade ago (Fitzpatrick, 2008).

However, given that low-income children may receive subsidized care through Head Start or other social welfare programs and upper-income families are more able to afford early care and education, families with modest incomes may experience the greatest challenges in accessing high-quality preschool options (Fuller et al., 2002). A recent study found that children in the lowest-income families (below the poverty threshold) and those in the wealthiest families had better educated and trained caregivers than those in families with intermediate income levels (Dowsett, Huston, Imes, & Gennetian, 2008). Reflecting the increasing burden on working- and middle-class families, in all but one state, the cost of child care for a 4-year-old in an urban area is greater than the cost of public college tuition (Ewen, Blank, Hart, Schulman, & Children's, 2002).

Access to preschool offerings also varies as a function of geographic location. Children in the Northeast and the South are more likely than children in the Midwest and West to be enrolled in full-day preschool programs (33% compared with 23% and 22%, respectively, in 2003), which parallels the most comprehensive state-sponsored public preschool efforts (Fuller & Liang, 1996; Grace et al., 2006). Pre-K enrollment among 4-year-olds is highest in states like Georgia and Oklahoma, which embarked on large-scale public prekindergarten initiatives (Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005). In contrast, 3- to 5-year-olds growing up in the West are least likely to be enrolled in any preschool programs (52%) compared with only 37% of children in the Northeast (Child Trends, 2010). Children in rural areas are less likely to participate in prekindergarten than their nonrural peers, having almost a 12 percentage point lower probability of enrolling in a prekindergarten program (Temple, 2009). Overall, rural children are more likely than nonrural children to have no participation in formal early learning programs, being more likely to receive care from relatives or other in-home daycare providers (Temple, 2009).

Disparities in Quality

Beyond access, the quality of early learning experiences has tremendous sway in their impact. High-quality preschool instruction has been consistently demonstrated an important educational support for students (Farkas & Beron, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2008), particularly for those from low-income backgrounds (Schweinhart, Barnes, Weikart, Barnett, & Epstein, 1993). However, there is general lack of consensus regarding what constitutes high-quality care. Quality has been determined generally through an assessment of "regulables," those aspects of the educational environment that may be easily regulated and assessed. Typical regulables include student-teacher ratios, class sizes,

space requirements, teacher education levels, and various aspects of the classroom environment. However, many researchers suggest that it is qualitative elements of the preschool curriculum that have the greatest impact on students, including learning environment and quality of instruction (Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Simm, 2000; Wright, 2007; Wright, in press). It will be important for researchers and policy makers to develop more effective tools to assess the less tangible elements of program quality (e.g. student–teacher relationships, teacher quality, peer interactions, or social climate of the classroom) in order to ensure that high-quality educational opportunities are delivered across programs.

Regardless of measure, however, it is clear that all early care and education offering are not the same. Perhaps nowhere are the inequities inherent in the current preschool “system” more visible than when viewed from the perspective of quality. Though many states have created tiered reimbursement systems to incentivize program quality, the vast majority of providers do not achieve top-tier status (Muenchow & Marsland, 2007). For example, a recent report found that in North Carolina, often recognized as a leader in early childhood education, only 3.5% of centers and 2.8% of family child care homes are licensed at the five-star level (Muenchow & Marsland, 2007). In comparison to centers serving wealthier families, centers serving low-income families are more apt to score lower on process indicators of quality, including child–teacher interactions and educational content (Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004; Phillips, Voran, Kisker, & Howes, 1994). Though, broadly speaking, some research has indicated that the average quality of centers serving different income levels does not differ greatly, with most programs having plenty of room for improvement (Dowsett et al., 2008).

While examining some of the drivers of quality, researchers have found that centers with less than 10% turnover annually tend to score higher on measures of quality than centers with higher teacher turnover rates (Helburn & Colorado University, 1995). Unfortunately, estimates of the annual teacher turnover rate in U.S. preschools range from 20% to 30% (Gable, Rothrauff, Thornburg, & Mauzy, 2007; Whitebook, Kipnis, & Bellm, 2007) to as high as 40% to 50% annually (Barnett, 2003; Laverty et al., 2002), about double the rate among K-12 teachers.

In considering the reason for such high turnover, teachers most often cite low wages as their rationale for leaving the early childhood sector. Structurally, this is a problem for the early childhood sector given that teacher wages are among the strongest correlates of classroom quality (Phillips, Burchinal, Howes, & Cryer, 1997; Phillips et al., 1994; Scarr, Eisenberg, & Deater-Deckard, 1994). The problems of insufficient compensation are particularly

pronounced in low-quality privately owned programs serving low-income children and their families, where wages are often extremely low. At age 4.5, children in the poorest families had the least well-educated and trained caregivers, and caregivers for those in high-income families had the highest levels of education and training (Dowsett et al., 2008). In an economically disparate and unregulated environment, it seems that those with fewer resources, the early childhood sector writ-large and programs serving low-income children particularly, are not well positioned to compete for high-quality instruction, further perpetuating a tracked preschool system.

Barriers to Access and Quality

The previous discussion highlights the stratified nature of the current preschool environment. Those in the United States with adequate resources may access world-class early learning opportunities, while those without sufficient financial resources or access to high-quality options often find themselves being underserved or attending lower-quality educational options. Consideration of these inequities reveals a complex mix of structural impediments and social values that serve jointly to perpetuate this imbalance. Following is a discussion of how economic forces, attitudes about women and women's work, views on the importance of childhood, and geographic structures influence the politics of universal preschool.

The Limitations of an Economic Rationale for Universal Preschool

Work force development has typically been argued the rationale for public funding of early childhood educational programs (Brown & Wright, in press). Though increasingly the rationale for universal preschool is focused on enhancing child-level outcomes, developing a work force for the future, it has historically been argued that child care is a necessity in order for women to return quickly to the labor force following the birth of their children. Given this focus on supporting the mother, or full employment and subsequent economic growth, early childhood programs were not conceived initially as opportunities for the progressive education of children. Rather, nurseries or other out-of-home care options were meant to provide a clean, safe place for children to stay while their mothers were at work. Low-cost, convenient options were preferred given that child care options were funded at times by corporations as an incentive for women to work or that many families were required to pay for child care expenses out-of-pocket. Even today, in order

for women to return to work, the cost of child care typically has to be less than their earned salaries.

A focus on economic considerations has had important implications for preschool quality and access. Given that economic efficiency is the implicit value underlying a commitment to work force development, early childhood education has typically been provided at the lowest cost possible. Indeed, the cost and related sophistication of the early childhood sector could not surpass families' abilities or business' willingness to pay for it. This has resulted in early care and education becoming a commodity, relegated to the marketplace and market forces. Consequently, child care providers have been forced to differentiate their offerings most broadly as a function of cost and, ultimately, quality. Structurally, this commoditization of child care has been necessary due to the absence of public funding for preschool education.

Educational Consequences of a Market-Driven Rationale for Early Childhood Education

Given its current structure, children from families with more financial resources typically attend educational programs with greater resources and better quality than do children from homes with less income (Fuller & Liang, 1996; Magnuson et al., 2004; Rist, 2000). This dynamic serves to perpetuate a class-based educational system, such that by age 3, the same relative difference in vocabulary between upper-, middle-, and lower-income children at high school graduation already exists (Farkas & Beron, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995). While these class distinctions are not wholly the results of differences in school quality (Hoff, 2003; McLoyd, 1998), variations in educational experience certainly contribute. This widening gap between the wealthy and those lacking in sufficient resources reflects both the need and challenges of achieving the promise of high-quality, universal preschool.

One of the greatest threats to program quality in preschool education is such economic segregation. Given the funding structure of most preschool efforts, classrooms often reflect the socioeconomic makeup of the communities in which they are located, with low-income children attending schools with other low-income children and wealthier students attending with wealthier peers. Such economic disparity is particularly pronounced in urban and suburban areas (Fuller & Liang, 1996; Grace et al., 2006). In Washington, D.C., for example, 60% of the city's children live in homes earning less than US\$40,064 per year, while the wealthiest 20% living in homes with an average income of US\$186,630 per year (Rodgers & Lazare, 2004). This has resulted in a two-tiered educational system, with very wealthy students attending

one of the most elite private education systems in the country and low-income students attending what is generally assessed as one of the nation's lowest-performing public school districts.

Developmentally, this is a problem because of the social nature of learning. Young children, especially, learn through encountering their social environment (Vygotsky, 1978). New experiences necessitate the need for expanded vocabularies, different types of peer interactions build new social skills, and highly stimulating environments foster curiosity. When children are segregated by socioeconomic difference, days are typically spent with peers, and often teachers, from the same or similar communities. Such homogeneity in the classroom is in opposition to what is known about the importance of a unique and stimulating learning environment.

The deleterious effects of this phenomenon are particularly pronounced in economically challenged and socially stressed communities. In addition to the previously mentioned disparities in vocabulary development, differences in socioemotional regulation as a function of social class (Evans & English, 2002; McLoyd, 1998) have also been well documented, with low-income children being more likely to experience difficulties adjusting to the demands of the classroom (Qi & Kaiser, 2003). Similarly, classroom learning environments and school culture often vary as a result of the school's socioeconomic makeup, again with low-income students most likely to matriculate in schools with inadequate resources (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Even the most capable students are unable to access new words and learning experiences in environments lacking in such opportunities and resources.

Exacerbating these challenges, young children being raised in low-income environments are often more likely to demonstrate developmental challenges (McLoyd, 1998), have special learning needs (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999), or to have been exposed to traumatic events that make it challenging for them to focus on the demands of learning (Breslau, Wilcox, Storr, Lucia, & Anthony, 2004; Wright, in press). In classrooms with so many needs, it is overwhelming and often impossible to leverage enough resources. Compounding this fact, many low-income children find themselves enrolled in classes with peers sharing the same limitations, thus lacking a peer role model to scaffold their development.

Good Intentions Have Not Proven Good Enough

Recognizing the particular challenges faced by children growing up in low-income environments, the government has increasingly sought to intervene in these children's lives.

Thousands of low-income students participate in early care and education as a result of government-subsidized voucher systems. However, in many circumstances, these vouchers reimburse child care providers at a rate much lower than the actual market rate and cost of high-quality programming. As a result, low-income children are typically served in low-cost, low-quality settings, while more affluent children attend higher-cost, higher-quality programs (Lamb, 1998).

As a more comprehensive response to the needs of young children of low-income families, the federal government rolled out Head Start in 1965 and Early Head Start in 1994. Head Start promotes school readiness among enrolled low-income, preschool-aged children by enhancing their social and cognitive development through educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services, while Early Head Start extends these services to infants and toddlers. Though Head Start has showed some positive impacts for children and families (Ayoub et al., 2009; Bryant, Burchinal, Lau, & Sparling, 1994; Joo, 2010; Zill et al., 2001), it has still been criticized, even by its founders, for not further socially integrating early learning environments (Colvin, 2007). Although Head Start and, more recently, Early Head Start, have provided low-income families with access to relatively higher quality than they would otherwise be able to access, it is arguable, however, if the quality of most Head Start programs is similar to children attending high-quality fee-for-service programs. Likewise, only 50% of eligible children are presently being served by the program (Colvin, 2007).

As a result, though well intentioned, these intervention efforts have often served to further handicap students across the arcs of their educational careers by segregating them from more affluent peers. It is precisely this dynamic that is perpetuating much of the inequity in the broader educational system. Given the major differences between low-income and middle- and upper-income students already present at age 3, many middle- and upper-income families are not willing to sacrifice learning opportunities for their students in order to allow low-income children access to these same opportunities (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). Enrolling their students in classrooms with others so far behind seems to them like too great a risk.

Academic Achievement as a Barrier to Equity and Access

Increasingly, policy makers and the public are aware of the consequences of such stark differences in the school readiness of young children. As such, the rationale for preschool has shifted from workforce development to academic preparedness, and with it, a new class-based phenomenon is beginning to emerge.

As teachers have been held more accountable for the academic achievement of their students, policy makers and school leaders have had to create indicators and assessments by which to measure their success (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The politics of assessment and achievement have further exacerbated the class-based differences present in the early care and education system (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Across the nation, school districts are extending learning standards to the preschool and, in some cases, the infant/toddler classroom. Given the consequences surrounding these standards, some fear that the early childhood classroom has become a high-stakes environment (Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004). Increasingly, educators are opting to “dumb down” first- or second-grade curricula for the pre-k classroom, on the false belief that exposure to these things will help students better understand and test more effectively on them at a later date. This has eroded developmentally appropriate practice in many classrooms (Corrie, 1999; Miller, Almon, & Alliance, 2009), with such teachers privileging rote memorization of facts. These “skill and drill” approaches to teaching have serious consequences for students, with two of the most serious being less opportunity for exploration and creativity in the preschool classroom, and limited exposure to vocabulary words and concepts not explicitly stated in the learning standards. This often impedes students in valuing knowledge as important in and of itself and understanding how to learn new things independently of a teacher, skills critically important for long-term academic and career achievement.

However, the consequences of this movement have not been born equally. Given that middle- and upper-income children are more likely to attend private schools not accountable to such standards or are typically expected to meet learning standards as a matter of course, their early childhood classrooms often continue to reflect developmental best practices (Rist, 2000; Wilcox, 1988). As a result, these students are developing a sense of agency, greater vocabularies, improved social skills, and are being asked questions by teachers as opposed to being given answers to memorize. A critical reading of these outcomes suggests that the skills developed in middle- and upper-class classrooms are those typically associated with management and leadership (Rist, 2000; Wilcox, 1988), trajectories that many of these children will ultimately follow. In contrast, the dominant approach of conformity and yielding to teacher control present in many classrooms serving low-income children mirror those qualities typically valued by labor/worker positions. Consequently, even though current efforts seem to be focused on academic readiness, their execution perpetuates the status quo.

A Market-Driven Preschool System Perpetuates Gender, Class, and Racial Discrimination

When viewed from both economic and educational achievement perspectives, the politics surrounding the universal preschool debate are imbedded in class-based distinctions and disparity. Given that economic resources often serve as gatekeepers to social networks and social location, society tends to become segregated by economic resources, with wealth becoming increasingly concentrated. As such social values and social distinctions become enacted, these forces become solidified through their commoditization, with certain people and certain types of work being more valuable to society than others. Disproportionately, the structure of the early childhood economy has also served to perpetuate gender, class, economic, and racial inequity upon women, specifically those who are non-White and belonging to low-income group.

Compressed wages for early child care providers has been a consequence of the typical private provider system and a tool for the perpetuation of their lower socioeconomic status. Given the need for financial efficiency, salaries for child care providers have typically been among the lowest-earning job categories. A recent report indicates child care teachers receive the lowest pay and benefits of any other U.S. occupation (Herzenberg, Price, & Bradley, 2005). Janitors, secretaries, and others whose jobs require only a high school diploma and a few years experience earn more than pre-k teachers, on average. Assistant teachers fare even worse, with the full-time average wage too low to keep a family of three out of poverty (Barnett, 2003). Preschool teachers earn less than half of the salary of kindergarten teachers, and the gap between pre-K teachers and staff members with similar qualifications increases as their level of education increases (Barnett, 2003). For example, in May 2008, the median salary for U.S. kindergarten teachers was between US\$47,100 and US\$51,180, while the average salary for preschool teachers was US\$23,870 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010), further underscoring why good teachers leave the private child care/early education sector.

These low-wages have typically attracted low-skilled or less-educated workers to the child care/early education sectors, particularly for children attending low-cost, low-quality programs. Teachers in private settings are not required to participate in any preservice training in thirty-eight states, and only half of the states that offer state-financed preschool programs require teachers to have completed bachelor degree requirements (Ackerman, 2004). Low wages have a significant impact on teacher turnover rates and ultimately

program quality. As a result, the students most in need of high-quality options are least likely to receive them.

Given that, historically, women have had less access to educational opportunities and that child care has been deemed women's work, it has most often been women who have inhabited these low-wage positions. Center-based teachers are most often White, married women in their mid-30s with an associates degree (Herzenberg et al., 2005; Kagan, Kauerz, & Tarrant, 2007). Most providers typically leave their positions in their third year (Gable et al., 2007), citing low wages most frequently as their rationale for departing (Whitebook, Sakai, & Howes, 2004). This has served to reflect and reinforce the devaluing of both women's contribution to the workforce and early child care and education. As a secondary consequence, child care as a role and industry has become functionally devalued in comparison to the other jobs women leave their children to perform. In present times, this has made it increasingly difficult to professionalize the field more broadly.

Countering the Politics of Preschool

Given that child care has been the domain of marginalized workers doing marginalized work, it has been challenging to argue for its importance more broadly. In the largely private provider system, families with adequate resources typically pay for their own high-quality arrangements or choose to care for their children directly. Given their satisfaction with the current arrangement, they have not often been incited to advocate for reform. In perpetuating this middle-class ideal, conservative opponents of universal preschool movement have often critiqued a public preschool system for intruding on family choices about how best to raise their own children (Brown & Wright, in press). Extending this argument, others have derided a universal offering as a further expansion of big government and government welfare (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003; Olsen, 1999). Some individuals have intimated that they would rather spend additional resources on their own children than subsidizing the cost of someone else's child (Brown & Wright, in press; Olsen, 1999). These conservative critiques of the universal preschool movement have served to undercut its political urgency.

Nevertheless, as families and policy makers have become more aware of the importance of high-quality early childhood educational opportunities and the cost of child care has skyrocketed (Giannarelli & Barsirmantov, 2000), momentum for a universal preschool program in the United States is growing. Increasingly, politicians are running and getting elected on campaign promises of expanding preschool options, and several states have instituted

attempts to provide universal coverage. Increasingly, though, implementation of universal preschool access is proving more difficult than garnering its support may have been (Brown & Wright, in press).

Time for a New Approach

Though universal preschool advocates are gaining momentum, current debates largely overlook many of the concerns about structures, disparity, and discriminatory legacies previously raised in this discussion. In order for universal preschool policies to achieve their promise, new structures and social commitments are necessary. Most important among these, it is critical that universal preschool initiatives create incentives for the emergence of mixed-income early childhood classrooms.

Low-income students must have access to the same educational opportunities as their middle- and upper-income counterparts in order to achieve at the same levels in the long run. As a result of long-standing disparities, if low-income parents have never been exposed to schooling that “works,” it might be impossible for them to imagine the steps necessary to make things better. As such, active Parent Teacher Associations, community involvement, and broad networks of social support are often limited in public schools serving underresourced communities. Over time, this lack of formal and informal social support structure has resulted in schools that are segregated not just by race or social class—but by social capital. As defined by its major theorists (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000), social capital includes those features of social organizations, such as networks of secondary associations, which function as resources for individuals and facilitate collective action.

Social capital is critical to the success of any school. For example, high-performing schools tend to attract more and more families who have access to social resources, professional networks, financial resources, and access to different types of innovation and information. Conversely, low-performing schools repel families with enough resources to make a choice, leaving behind those who have nowhere else to go and with far more needs than access to social capital to meet those needs. Communities with little social capital do not have easy and informal access to power brokers, like superintendents, who hold school leaders accountable, lack networks with those who have financial resources to donate to school improvements, or may not understand what is required to have a child admitted to college, a place the parent may never have been. Likewise, in order to develop new skills and perspectives, students must be exposed to situations and others who are different, with a broad range of unique perspectives and skills. Children enrolled in schools

with high concentration of poverty often share the same strengths, resources, and challenges—making it difficult for them to broaden their knowledge base and perspective. Such lack of social capital is much more crippling to school success than financial resources, explaining why Washington, D.C., may spend more on each student than other districts with fewer resources who perform much better on outcome measures. However, few education reform efforts have explicitly targeted building social capital as the means for education reform, rather framing it as a positive consequence of educational improvements and individual student achievement vis-à-vis the American Dream. Explicit public conversations about the demands and critical importance of mixed-income public schools is essential to any systemic, positive change. As well, family and community investment in early childhood education will be fundamental to the success of any attempts at reform.

Given that differences in academic achievement and preparedness are already substantial by the time students are 3 years old, it will also be important for early childhood programs to begin much earlier in engaging children and their families. Given that many infants are enrolled in formal child care soon after their births as a result of parents' needs to return to work, it is important for the public discourse to consider the ramifications of universally funded infant and toddler care options. It might be that such policies provide families either the option of center-based care or extended periods of family leave for both parents. Family policies that are both flexible and comprehensive are more likely to ensure that children receive the best care possible and provide opportunities for families to receive the support they need to be successful.

A New Rationale

Though current calls for universal preschool are more child centered than in previous eras of the movement, workforce development and economic considerations are still largely provided as the rationale (Brown & Wright, in press). Politicians, parents, business interest groups, and other advocates often argue that earlier entry into the public education system is necessary to provide students with a competitive advantage in the transforming global economy. It is precisely such rallying cries that have resulted in the current discourse focused on academic preparedness, school readiness, and “back to basics” education.

Such instrumental rationales have resulted in an increasing standardization of childhood. This standardization is in direct conflict with the demands of an innovation-based, highly technological global economy. Learned conformity and rote memorization in the absence of opportunities for the development of

critical problem-solving skills and creative thinking strategies will most surely guarantee limited horizons in an innovation-oriented marketplace, an approach that is particularly damning for low-income children. In order to best prepare students for maximum opportunity in a market-driven society, it is critically important to develop an alternative rationale for early childhood education.

Advocating for the rights of the child as a rationale for publicly funded universal preschool would result in a more sophisticated and developmentally appropriate preschool structure. Both Reggio-Emilia, Italy, and Sweden, arguably the two best publicly funded preschool systems in the world, are organized around the notion that children have rights and that all stages of childhood are unique and important periods in a one's life (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Taguchi & Munkammar, 2003). This paradigm shifts the notion of success from achievement to development, from outcome to process, a much more developmentally appropriate pedagogy. In both Reggio-Emilia and Sweden, a children's rights' rationale has resulted in a better educated, higher-status early childhood workforce, a more sophisticated curricular model, and an early childhood system that is broadly recognized for fostering curiosity, creativity, confidence, and collaboration (Edwards et al., 1998; Taguchi & Munkammar, 2003)—traits critical to success in an increasingly diverse global economy.

A New Structure

Present educational funding structures are perhaps the greatest threat to greater educational equity and achievement. Though mixed-income learning environments are critically important in overcoming present disparities, current structures create strong disincentives for such mixed-income educational opportunities. A private, fee-for-service funding structure only serves to perpetuate economic segregation. Publicly funded universal preschool programs are critically important in ensuring that students have similar access to quality learning environments.

Similarly, publicly funded early childhood programs must provide education of the highest quality in order to incentivize the return of middle- and upper-income families to the public education system. The stakes are far too high for most parents to participate in an unproven social experiment; quality must be great in order to gain and secure their trust and participation. Public options must insist on a better-educated workforce and provide pathways for current child care providers to earn the education necessary in order to remain engaged in the high-quality system. Developing staff teams that reflect the

socioeconomic diversity of families served by the preschool program will serve as an important model for families attempting to work across historical divisions of race, ethnicity, and social class. Such renewed emphasis on the value of early education will elevate the status of early care providers, increase salaries, and provide stable employment, addressing many of the system's current limitations.

Building the capacity of the universal preschool system in the preceding ways will ultimately result in a pedagogical approach that is of higher quality and more developmentally appropriate. Though many aim to reduce learning to a list of standardized activities, the development of knowledge should be expansive, complex, relevant, and exciting. Curiosity is the impetus for learning, and publicly funded preschool options should aim to spark and nurture the unique interests of each child. It should be impossible to walk into a preschool classroom and tell by a child's performance the socioeconomic status of her or his parents. Creativity, inspiration, determination, and hope should determine a child's future, not race, class, family structure, or zip code.

Looking Forward

Taking on such embedded challenges will not be easy, requiring much public discourse, civic soul searching, and a willingness to move beyond partisan divisions to accomplish what is best for children. Both the Reggio-Emilia and Swedish models began with broad public participation, leveraging many community-based meetings and small group conversations to reach a community/countrywide commitment that is in the best interests of children. Central to both is an organizing belief in the importance of community and collaboration and a deep investment in the value of children and childhood. In short, early childhood education becomes important in and of itself in these cultures and supports children in developing and contributing to shared cultural values.

In contrast, the present discourse in the United States is focused on outcomes and strategies, aiming to influence what children will contribute in their economic futures. As such, childhood also becomes a commodity in our collective thinking—what is its value, how much should be preserved, and how much should be spent? Increasingly, it seems that every child is not valued the same. If, indeed, the United States is committed to allowing all children access to the resources necessary for the social mobility so embraced in the American ideal, investment in high-quality, universally accessible, socially integrated early childhood education is essential. In taking on what is necessary to achieve this vision, it is possible that some of the structures and attitudes that have led to such disparity may also be dislodged.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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Bio

Travis S. Wright is an assistant professor of educational research at The George Washington University Graduate School of Education and Human Development, where he directs the Project on Risk, Resilience, and Urban Leadership. He studies the relationship between risk and resilience in the lives of women, children, and adolescents living in urban poverty and the linkages between early childhood education and community development. He recently founded the NewLegacySchool, an innovative community preschool serving families and children birth-three in Washington, DC. He received his doctorate in human development and psychology from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 2006.