

Pre-K Education as a Means of Combatting Poverty  
By Ellen Albritton

In a country that prides itself on equal opportunity and on being a place in which one can achieve upward socioeconomic mobility with hard work and dedication, education is expected to be the great equalizer among students born into a variety of situations. However, the educational-achievement gap that exists between white and non-white, urban and non-urban, low-income and economically advantaged students suggests that the United States' public-education system is not yet fulfilling its promise of giving every student the chance to succeed. The issue of education for the country's disadvantaged children cannot be separated from the issue of poverty, for "there is one sure way to win the long-lost war on poverty—to provide a high-quality education to all children" (Canada 1). Because of the positive effects education can have on limiting overall poverty, it is imperative that the achievement gap be addressed before it widens more.

The evidence that documents the educational-achievement gap is overwhelming. Ninety percent of white eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds and ninety-four percent of Asian Americans in the same age group have either completed high school or obtained a GED. For blacks, the rate falls to eighty-one percent, and for Hispanics it drops to sixty-three percent (HCZ). For those African American and Hispanic students fortunate enough to finish high school, their reading and math abilities are at the same level as those of white eighth-graders. These inequalities present at the high-school level persist in post-secondary education, since black students are half as likely, and Hispanic students one-third as likely, to earn a bachelors degree by age thirty as are white students. Likewise, as the United States moves toward a higher-skilled labor force, dropouts have fewer chances for success. The current state of the achievement gap "is truly the American Nightmare: impoverished, uneducated, and unemployable amid a land of plenty" (Canada 5).

These statistics show that elementary and secondary schools with high minority populations need to be reformed. However, reforming these institutions will not erase achievement gaps completely, since "disadvantaged children begin kindergarten with significantly lower cognitive skills than their more advantaged counterparts" (HCZ). Cognitive abilities for black and Hispanic students are sixty percent lower than white students around age five. Math abilities in black children are twenty-one percent lower, and nineteen percent lower for Hispanic children, than white children entering kindergarten (HCZ). Clearly, the first step in closing the educational gap is to make sure that all young children enter the public-education system equally ready to learn. This can be accomplished through successful early education programs.

From its inception in the United States, early education programs have provided an advantage to those in the upper socioeconomic levels. In the mid-nineteenth century, when kindergarten first began in the United States, the institutions "served children from better-off families," and it was "not until the early twentieth century [that] town governments and public schools begin to finance wider expansion" (Fuller 39). A large increase in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs coincided with the Great Depression, since "federal support for early education grew during times of national crises" (Kagan and Reid 573). Beginning with the ambitious agenda of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society of the

1960s, which elaborated on policies initiated during Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s, public preschools typically have served low-income children, while private preschools cater to the middle and upper classes. This has resulted in a legacy of "services segregated by income, which often translates into quality differences [in education . . .] and it defies deeply held American values regarding the equal opportunity that all young children need in order to thrive and learn" (573).

In response to the disparity experienced between white and minority students in pre-kindergarten programs, an ambitious and intensive service in Harlem has been launched to close this gap. The program, Harlem Gems, is a part of a larger institution called the Harlem Children's Zone and is run by a man named Geoffrey Canada. Canada's holistic approach to education is intended either to improve upon or to remove obstacles urban and typically minority students must overcome. This is why the Harlem Children's Zone is a full community center incorporating parenting classes, pre-kindergarten programs, a kindergarten-to-eighth-grade charter school, after-school tutoring, community-building groups, a health clinic, and numerous smaller projects (Harlem Children's Zone).

Despite the fact that state of New York requires pre-kindergartens to run only for ten months a year and two-and-a-half hours a day, Harlem Gems lasts eleven months, starts at 8:45 a.m., and does not finish until 5:45 p.m. It has a four-to-one child-to-teacher ratio, while the New York standard is set at nine-to-one. The children do "all of the regular prekindergarten activities—imaginative play, music, building blocks, and recess, as well as a midday nap and three meals—but throughout the day the emphasis is on language" (Tough 205). According to E.D. Hirsch, Jr., "what children in low-income neighborhoods are lacking early on is a general cultural vocabulary, the kind of core knowledge of the world and how it works that makes it easier for a child to go on and read independently about unfamiliar topics" (206). Harlem Gems incorporates Hirsch's viewpoint by teaching children about a number of different cultures, selecting challenging words for vocabulary lessons, and using foreign-language instruction. This dedication to a full-language immersion has worked at Harlem Gems. Eighteen percent of incoming children scored "delayed" or "very delayed" on the Bracken Scale for four-year-olds, with seventeen percent scoring "advanced" or "very advanced." After eleven months, fifty-one percent scored "advanced" or "very advanced," and, "most remarkably, over three years, not a single student was still considered delayed or very delayed after a year of Gems" (207). The Bracken Scale is used to measure basic conceptual development of children aged two to seven, and six of its eleven sub-tests specifically measure a child's "knowledge of those readiness concepts that parents and preschool and kindergarten teachers traditionally teach children in preparation for formal education" (Bracker).

There is a similarly intensive prekindergarten program called Bright Beginnings in North Carolina in which "after a year of Bright Beginnings, students not only scored higher on a 'kindergarten entry profile' test than a demographically similar control group; remarkably, they also beat the average for the city as a whole, despite the fact that low cognitive scores were a prerequisite for inclusion in the program" (Tough 211). To phrase this succinctly, in only one year of the program, a group of four-year-olds with the worst cognitive abilities in the district had completely closed the achievement gap. Again, the focus is on language. A

typical day at Bright Beginnings consists of “four literacy circles, which build on themes each week,” as well as an emphasis on the relation of hearing and seeing words (Pascopella 37).

But these intensive pre-kindergarten programs are not the only answer in eliminating the achievement gap at an early age. As stated above, the four-year-olds entering the Bright Beginnings program already scored at the bottom level on examinations of cognitive abilities, as did many of the children enrolled in Harlem Gems. Clearly, in order to fully eliminate the achievement gap between rich and poor students, programs need to be targeted toward earlier stages in children’s lives. In fact, efforts to level the playing field need to center on children’s development in the womb.

The importance of starting young now is widely accepted among middle- and upper-class parents. In 1994, the Carnegie Corporation published a study on the importance of the first three years of life to lifelong cognitive development. The study, which was based on the neurology of the infant brain, concluded that “because of inadequate early childhood stimulation, (partly due to the rise of single-parent families and working mothers), too many of the country’s youngest children were entering school not ready to learn” (Tough 56). This study’s findings permeated throughout American society, giving rise to the Baby Einstein videos, a special issue of Newsweek, and a White House conference. However, during this period of focus on the zero-to-three period of childhood, it came to Geoffrey Canada’s attention that no programs existed to help parents in Harlem understand this critical period.

To counter a lack of resources, Canada decided to launch a program called Baby College. Baby College was developed under the guidance of T. Berry Brazelton, a major player in the zero-to-three movement. Baby College is a nine-week workshop for expecting parents. Its two major pillars are discipline and brain development, and a focus on these two themes characterizes four of the course’s nine weeks. Other weeks are filled with instruction regarding home safety; preventing asthma, “which was becoming near-epidemic in Harlem homes”; and proper immunizations. Throughout Baby College, participants are exposed to, and encouraged to join, the vast network of other Harlem Children Zone programs, in order “to entangle these parents in the Harlem Children’s Zone web in any and every way possible” (Tough 67).

The two pillars of Baby College, discipline and brain development, are intertwined. When trying to persuade Baby College parents against the use of corporal punishment, instructors encounter a lot of opposition because of its long cultural history within Harlem, as in many inner-city neighborhoods. According to Brazelton:

The middle-class style of discipline—negotiation, explanation, impulse control—was intertwined with the middle-class style of brain development. There was simply more talk in middle-class discipline, and thus more verbal stimulation; encouraging a child to understand the reasons for a prohibition, and to take part in choosing an alternative, was a powerful cognitive stimulus. (Tough 81)

Although it is too soon to tell if any children have benefited from the knowledge their parents gained during their Saturday mornings at Baby College, similar programs appear to produce lasting advantages.

One of these is Early Head Start, a federal program that provides home visits from social workers, parenting classes, and other services to low-income families with young children. Early Head Start adheres to a holistic approach similar to that of Baby College and the Harlem Children's Zone generally. Studies have found that children enrolled in Early Head Start "performed better on cognitive and language development measures" (Dawley et. al. 62). In much the same way as Baby College, Early Head Start hopes to help the parents involved develop parenting styles conducive to a child's success. The program already has had much success in this regard, with participating parents becoming more emotionally supportive and "provid[ing] more language and learning opportunities at home, read[ing] to their children more and spank[ing] their children less" (Dawley et. al. 63) A second successful program, the Nurse-Family Partnership, sends trained nurses to counsel low-income mothers during pregnancy and their children's infancies. Although this program results in "reductions of childhood injuries and in the number of subsequent pregnancies, improved school readiness, and increased maternal employment" (Dawley et. al 60), it lacks the emphasis on discipline and brain development; more specifically, it lacks the emphasis on language present in Harlem Gems, Bright Beginnings, and Baby College.

An emphasis on language, particularly in the realm of discipline, is imperative in order to provide low-income children with the help necessary to close the achievement gap. Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley conducted a study of the language acquisition of children whose parents were on welfare, members of the working-class, or professionals. The study's first major finding was that "vocabulary growth differed sharply by class and that the gap between classes opened early." The vocabularies of the children of professional parents more than doubled those of children with parents on welfare, and the IQs also differentiated by class, with "the average IQ among the professional children [being] 117, and the welfare children [having] an average IQ of 79" (Tough 42). The reason for this wide gap was attributed in part to the number of discouragements and encouragements heard by the children. By age three, a child of professional parents would have heard "about 500,000 encouragements and 80,000 discouragements." However, "for the welfare children, the ratio was reversed: they would hear, on average, about 80,000 encouragements and 200,000 discouragements" (43). Children from wealthier families also took part in conversations about "the past and future, of feelings, of abstractions, of the way one thing causes another—all of which stimulated intellectual development"( 43). This further strengthens Baby College's position of arguing against corporal punishment and for more positive discipline based on learning.

Despite all of the research to back up the successfulness of effective early childhood education, even educational-reform movements that have included an early education provision have not gone far enough. This is partly due to American society's longstanding ambivalence about "whether young children should be served outside their homes at all" (Kagan and Reid 573). Consequently, federal support for early education has fluctuated, "leaving early education bereft of three essential mainstays: vision, permanence, and infrastructure" (573). However, after a past full of conflicting opinions and ineffective

programs, the country is at a crossroad regarding early education. The Harlem Children's Zone model has gained momentum through Paul Tough's work on the effort; his book relevant to HCZ was named one of the "Best Books of 2008" by both the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times. President Obama is a major endorser of using early education to combat the achievement gap, and Obama plans to quadruple the funding for Early Head Start (Education). Obama also has expressed explicit support for the HCZ model. During his presidential campaign, he stated that if he became president, "the first part of [his] plan to combat urban poverty will be to replicate the Harlem Children's Zone in twenty cities across the country" (Tough 265).

Positive change in America cannot occur if only eighty-one percent of blacks and sixty-three percent of Hispanics in our country are graduating from high school. In addition, there is little hope of ever erasing the educational achievement gap if black and Hispanic students entering kindergarten have sixty percent lower cognitive abilities than white students. It is time that effective early education programs, such as Baby College, Bright Beginnings, and Harlem Gems, take a prominent role in educational reform aimed at helping those students who historically have been denied adequate education.

## Works Cited

- Canada, Geoffrey. "Winning the War on Poverty through Education." Harlem Children's Zone. 2008. Web. 10 Apr. 2009.
- Bracker, B.A. "Bracken Basic Concept Scale—Revised." Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services. 1984. Early Childhood Research Institute. Web. 23 Apr. 2009.
- Dawley, Katy, et. al. "The New Family Partnership." American Journal of Nursing 107.11 (2007): 60-67. Web. 23 Apr. 2009
- "Education." The White House. 2009. President Barack Obama. Web. 14 Mar. 2009.  
<<http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/>>.
- Fuller, Bruce. Standardized Childhood. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007. Print.
- Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ). 2008. <<http://www.hcz.org/home>>. Web. 14 Mar. 2009.
- Kagan, Sharon Lynn and Jeanne L. Reid. "Invest in Early Childhood Education." Phi Delta Kappa 90.8 (2009): 572-576. Web. 14 Mar. 2009.
- Pascopella, Angela. "The ABCs of Early Ed." District Administration 32.4 (2003): 31-36. Web. 14 Mar. 2009.
- "Quick Facts." Helping Leaders Shape Education Policy. 2009. Education Commission of the States. Web. 23 Mar. 2009.
- Tough, Paul. Whatever It Takes. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. Print.