Breaking and Preventing the Cycle of Underachievement:
The Importance of Early Childhood Education for Hispanic Children In their Quest for Higher Education

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Comparative Early Childhood Education

I. Introduction

Hispanic children in the United States are struggling to keep up with their advantaged White counterparts all across the country, especially when it comes to graduating high school and attending college. The problem is that the US tends to wait until Hispanic students are in high school and reward the few that survived and got accepted into college with scholarships. They do not seem to care much about early childhood development, when that is where the problems with children from poor households can be met early and given attention in order to create a successful student from the very beginning. Access to early childhood education is the way to lower the high school drop out rate and make these students profitable members of society. Education is supposed to help redress inequities at birth and improve the lot of disadvantaged children as they grow up, but that is not currently happening because of the lack of early childhood education for Hispanics.

This paper will address the effect that childhood poverty has on Hispanic children, analyze how early childhood education can narrow the gap between them and White students, and give suggestions on how to improve current programs. This country needs free early childhood education to reach the masses of disadvantaged students who need a supplement for what they are not learning at

home in order to raise graduation rates, college acceptance and increase employment outlooks for Hispanic students.

II. The Effect of Childhood Poverty on Hispanic Students

Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States, with hundreds of immigrants arriving every year in search of jobs, education, and an overall better life and opportunities for their families. Being that most Hispanics in America are no more than second generation and from humble backgrounds, the group tends to be socioeconomically disadvantaged in comparison with other ethnic groups. According to a study done by the Pew Research Center, there are more Latino children living in poverty than children of any other racial or ethnic group. 2010 was the first time in U.S. history that the single largest group of poor children was not white. That year, 37.3% of poor children were Latino, 30.5% were white and 26.6% were black, according to an analysis of new data from the U.S. Census Bureau by the Pew Hispanic Center.[1]

The increase in poverty can be blamed on a combination of the group's growing numbers, high birth rates, low education standards and economic misfortunes. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Hispanics today make up a record 16.3% of the total U.S. population. What is important to mention here is that children pay a major role, comprising 23.1% of the nation's children. This disparity

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[1] Mark Hugo Lopez & Gabriel Velasco, Childhood Poverty Among Hispanics Sets Record, Leads Nation (Pew Research Ctr. 2011) [hereinafter The Toll of the Great Recession], http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/09/28/childhood-poverty-among-hispanics-sets-record-leads-nation/.

driven is mainly due to the high birth rates among Hispanic immigrants.[2] According to the 2010 Census, some 53.5% of children are white and 14.6% of children are black. Of the 6.1 million Latino children living in poverty, more than two-thirds (4.1 million) are the children of immigrant parents. The other 2 million are the children of parents born in the U.S. Among the 4.1 million impoverished Latino children of immigrants, the vast majority (86.2%) were born in the U.S.[3]

It is well documented that poverty often correlates with poor school performance and access to quality education. Between 2007 and 2010, poverty rates among Latino children grew the most among those in families with parents who have a high school diploma or less—up 9.7 percentage points since 2007. By contrast, Latino children with a parent who has a college degree saw the smallest poverty rate increase—just 0.6 percentage points between 2007 and 2010. Childhood poverty is also often associated with teen pregnancy, which also has a tendency to go hand-in-hand with dropping out of high school or not being able to attend college. Latino children who live in families headed by single mothers have the highest poverty rate—57.3%. Latino children in families with an unemployed parent also had one of the highest poverty rates overall, 43.5% in 2010.[4]

Education and the wide access to jobs that it customarily brings is the biggest

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[2] Pew Research Hispanic Trends Project, The Mexican-American Boom: Births Overtake Immigration (Pew Research Ctr. 2011), http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/07/14/the-mexican-american-boom-brbirths-overtake-immigration/.

[3] Mark Hugo Lopez & Gabriel Velasco, Childhood Poverty Among Hispanics Sets Record, Leads Nation (Pew Research Ctr. 2011) [hereinafter The Toll of the Great Recession], http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/09/28/childhood-poverty-among-hispanics-sets-record-leads-nation/.

[4] *Id.*

factor in ending the cycle of poverty for Latino families. In contrast to previous figures, just 8.7% of Latino children in families with a college-educated parent lived in poverty in 2010. By contrast, nearly half (48.3%) of Hispanic children with parents that have a high school degree or less lived below poverty levels in 2010.[5] Most Latino children are either raised by immigrant parents who are too disconnected from American society to be aware of the educational opportunities afforded to their kids or American-born parents who are too busy trying to make ends meat. While it may be part of the American Dream for Latino parents to have their children attend college, they do not have the tools to get their kids started on the right path due to financial issues and a low level of knowledge from these parents without college educations. With immigrant parents in particular, they are often left in the dark when it comes to the education of their kids because of the language barrier with teachers and not understanding the American system.

For both immigrant and American-born Hispanic families, the achievement gap develops before they even walk into kindergarten because family plays a powerful role in shaping abilities through genetics, culture and parental investments. The home environment of most Hispanic children under age 5 does not allow them to develop the necessary cognitive skills to compete with advantaged classmates. It is therefore crucial for these families to have access to free early childhood education where their children can be mentally stimulated and challenged between the ages of 3-4, making it more likely for them to have a successful elementary school experience, thus planting the seeds for future college

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[5] *Id*.

acceptance and employment opportunities.

III. Closing the Achievement Gap Between Hispanic Students and Whites through Early Childhood Education

Research has showed that smart investments in the early years of a child's life can increase the odds of success for all children, especially the most disadvantaged in our country. Top human development economist and Nobel Prize winner, James Heckman, presented an interesting study in 2013 on the effects of early childhood education, tearing apart the current system in the United States.[6] He presented a chart that showed the results of cognitive tests that were first performed in the 1980s on several hundred low-birth weight 3-year-olds, who were then retested at ages 5, 8 and 18. Children of mothers who had graduated from college scored much higher at age 3 than those whose mothers had dropped out of high school, proof of the advantage for young children of living in rich, stimulating environments. The difference in cognitive performance was just as big at age 18 as it had been at age 3. Luckily, a variety of intervention studies have shown that ability gaps in children from different socioeconomic groups can be reduced if remediation is attempted at early ages.[7]

Of course, when speaking of education in the United States, the issue of income inequality must be discussed. While the nation is certainly First World, the economic inequality within its borders sets it apart from the likes of Finland and

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[6] Eduardo Porter, *Investments in Education May Be Misdirected,* New York Times, Apr. 02, 2013 at , http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/03/business/studies-highlight-benefits-of-early-education.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&.

[7] Flavio Cunha & James J. Heckman, Investing in Our Young People (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research 2010), http://www.nber.org/papers/w16201.pdf.

other developed European counterparts. America lacks the social safety net that helps to even out the wealth of the economy in ways that benefits all citizens. The social safety net, which includes access to free early childhood education, is weak compared to Western Europe and does not do enough to balance out the wealth distribution in America. The US economy is distributed much less equally than Western economies, ranking 39th most unequal out of 136 countries in the Gini Coefficient scale. The Gini index measures the extent to which the distribution of income or consumption expenditure among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution.[8] The reality is, when it comes to economic equality and free social programs, the US falls next to developing countries such as Uganda, Jamaica, Cameroon, and Ivory Coast in the rankings.[9] This nation's abysmal social safety net does not include early childhood education for children under 5 and effects disadvantaged minorities in disproportionate rates. The lack of early childhood education sets up minority students to underperform and continue the cycle of academic underachievement.

According to the Latino Policy Forum, studies show that when Latino kids attend kindergarten, they are already six months behind peers in academic measures. Such cognitive gaps in early childhood development persist throughout school, resulting in the poor high school graduation rates seen around the country.[10]

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[8] http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI
[9] Tobin Grant, *Religion and Inequality Go Hand-in-Hand,* Christianity Today, Nov. 5, 2013 at, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/septemberweb-only/religioninequality.html.
[10] John Benson, *Latino Children Preschool Attendance Rate Is Lowest in United States,* Huffington Post, Aug. 14, 2014 at ,

The key in helping to lessen the gap between children in kindergarten is to use remedial efforts that supplement family environments to disadvantaged children. A large number of empirical studies document that cognitive ability is a powerful determinant of wages, schooling, participation in crime, and success in many aspects of social and economic life. Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles A. Murray's book, "The Bell Curve", gave the message that cognitive ability is an important predictor of socioeconomic success. In Heckman's study, researchers found changing the resources available to disadvantaged children improves their adult outcomes. In truth, the quality of education and school resources available have actually relatively small effects on ability deficits and have little effect on test scores by age across children from different socioeconomic groups.[11] What matters more is how prepared students are when they begin their education; the skills they bring with them and the motivation they have to want t succeed.

Research shows evidence of critical and sensitive periods in the development of the child, with many skills or traits more readily acquired at certain stages of childhood. For example, if syntax and grammar are not acquired early on, they appear to be very difficult to learn later on in life. IQ scores become stable by age 10 or so, suggesting a sensitive period for their formation below age 10. Usually, the later remediation is given to a disadvantaged child, the less effective it is. A study by O'Connor, Rutter, Beckett, Keaveney, Kreppner, & the English and Romanian Adoptees Study Team (2000) of adopted Romanian infants reared in severely

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http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/14/latino-children-preschool-attendance-rate-lowest_n_3756621.html.

[11] Flavio Cunha & James J. Heckman, Investing in Our Young People (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research 2010), http://www.nber.org/papers/w16201.pdf.

deprived orphanage environments before being adopted supports this claim. The later the Romanian orphan was rescued from the social, emotional and cognitive isolation of the orphanage; the lower was his or her cognitive performance at age 6.[12] In other words, studies have shown that regardless of what type of family they come from, a disadvantaged child can still be able to perform just as well as advantaged children as long as they receive adequate early childhood education to supplement for what is not being learned in the home.

IV. Changes to be Made in the Current Early Childhood Education System

The best step in the right direction right now would be for the US government to invest resources wisely on early childhood education since there is strong evidence of its success and the return on investment will far outweigh the costs. While the country does have the Head Start program, a federal program that promotes school readiness of children ages birth to 5 from low-income families, it is not reaching all the students that need it the most. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2013 Kids Count report reveals that Hispanic students continue to have the lowest pre school enrollment rates out of any group in the country, showing that roughly 63 percent of Latino children did not attend preschool compared with 50 percent of non-Hispanic white children. The experience of poverty and related risk factors — such as poor parenting, inadequate nutrition, frequent moves and changes in non- parental caregivers, insufficient cognitive stimulation and unsafe environments — can actually suppress brain development and have lasting effects. From even the youngest age, there are measurable differences in

[12] *Id.*

how children from lower-income families and enter school, where a lack of high-quality early childhood experiences is linked to failure to read at grade level by the end of third grade — a strong predictor of becoming a high school dropout.[13]

Therefore, what really needs to happen is educating the parents of the most vulnerable in society by letting them know the existence of early childhood education programs and the advantages of it, as well as adding an additional program that would help these parents better serve their kids at home. High-quality early childhood programs can help reduce the stresses of poverty by providing better care by teaching parents how to interact more positively with their pre-school age children. This is vital because of the enormous influence that parents have on their children, especially when those children are infants and toddlers. Both the children and parents need support. Early childhood education programs need to reach out to the parents in order to truly change the path for their children. This could include sending letters home that need to be signed about their child's progress and mandatory meetings with teachers a few times a year so that the parent can become as actively involved as possible. Visiting the child's home would also greatly help the parents develop skills in how to nurture their child in the home and help them reach their full potential. These initiatives would help disadvantaged Hispanic and minority children stay straight on the road to success.

V. Conclusion

[13] The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013 Databook: State Trends in Child Well-Being (2013), http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-2013KIDSCOUNTDataBook-2013.pdf#page=5.

In conclusion, the United States needs to better ensure that disadvantaged Hispanic children have access to early childhood education so that they are prepared to develop their skills and be challenged in kindergarten and throughout their education. Most Hispanic children in America do not have the luxury of being born into parents with college educations, or even ones that speak English, but that should not hold them back from achieving as much success as those children that do. Early childhood education is the stepping-stone for the future of minority students and will lead to greater numbers of such students staying out of the streets, avoiding teen pregnancy and the urge to drop out of high school, and instilling the aspiration to attend college and prevent the cycle of underachievement for future generations.