

Ensuring the Success of Early Childhood Education: Confronting Implicit Biases

Holly Sanchez Perry, DePaul University College of Law (2017)

Comparative Education Law and Policy: Early Childhood Education, July 2015

Introduction

Research done over the last few decades seems to point to the idea that early childhood education (also known as preschool or pre-Kindergarten) can have positive effects on a student's overall ability to learn and potential for growth within the educational system. Research also points to early childhood education as a starter for economic growth and reductions in poverty and crime. But can the positive effects of early childhood education be undercut by implicit bias in teachers? And if so, how can teachers confront this implicit bias to improve the learning experiences of their students? In this paper, I will explore the effects of implicit bias in early childhood education and ways in which teachers can actively confront their biases to ensure that students are able to reach their full potential.

Early childhood education is a broad term used to describe educational programming for children in preschool, generally between 3 and 5 years old. Head Start was one of the first early childhood education programs in the United States. Created in 1965 and federally funded, it was created in order to provide children from low socio-economic backgrounds free access to early childhood education programs. Additionally, the idea of early childhood education is a concept that has been greatly researched and is advocated by many groups. One such group, the National Education Association, drives policy and introduces legislation to increase access to this type of education. The idea of early childhood education for children living in poverty—predominately children from communities of color—is that it essentially compensates for the

child's disadvantage with an enriching classroom experience.¹ Of course, early childhood education is not a catchall for the solutions to poverty and related problems, but much research has gone into finding both the tangible and abstract successes of early childhood education and the positive effects that this education can have on both individuals and society as a whole.

One experiment to test this theory was called the Perry Preschool. This was a model that provided part-time services and home visits to Black children, ages 3 and 4. After one or two years of education in this setting, the children entered into the school system. Research showed that those who had participated in the Perry program scored higher in IQ tests at the start of their formal education as compared to the children who did not participate in the program. Similarly, the participants' early education had long-lasting effects on employment rates, earnings, and even chances of being arrested.² Another example of this theory in practice was the Abecedarian Project which provided low-income children, again, predominately from communities of color, with high quality early childhood education. Among other benefits, researchers found that participants in the Project were almost four times as likely to have graduated from college.³

Proponents of early childhood education stress that the preschool experience can provide children with a strong foundation for the rest of their formal education and that it can develop a better ability to socialize with peers and adults. Early childhood education is believed to have many tangible benefits, both for the person and for society.

¹ Child Development 41 <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c11722.pdf>

² Lawrence J. Schweinhart, Helen V. Barnes, and David P. Weikart. Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 27 (High/Scope Press, 1993).

³ Campbell, Frances A., Craig T. Ramey, Elizabeth Pungello, Joseph Sparling, and Shari Miller-Johnson. "Early Childhood Education: Young Adult Outcomes From the Abecedarian Project," *Applied Developmental Science*, 2002, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 42-57.

Poverty and Education

There is an undeniable connection between poverty and education. The 2010 U.S. Census revealed that one in five children is living in poverty conditions, and among those numbers, minority children dominate the highest rates.⁴ Children experiencing poverty are about 10 times as likely to drop out of high school—an educational level that is needed for most profitable employment.⁵ Additionally, research suggests that early childhood education can have a strong effect on the economic status of a family with the strongest impact on families living in poverty.⁶ Researchers in Tulsa, Oklahoma studied students from different socio-economic backgrounds and found that children from poor families (up to 130% of the federal poverty line) were entering kindergarten from early childhood education up to 11 months ahead of other, wealthier students.⁷ Arguably, a head start in education has the potential to yield much more desirable results as a child progresses through the education system and into the workforce. Other research has shown that early childhood education students are significantly more likely to graduate from high school and are 2.5 times more likely to continue on to higher education.⁸

There are also socio-economic benefits to society as a whole. Cost-benefit frameworks have enabled researchers to assess the value of the social investment in child development

⁴ *Child Poverty in the United States 2009 and 2010: Selected Race Groups and Hispanic Origin*, 2011 U.S. Census Bureau (2011).

⁵ American Psychological Association, *Effects of Poverty, Hunger, and Homelessness on Children and Youth* (2016), available at <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/poverty.aspx>.

⁶ Hirokazu Yoshikawa et al., *Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education*, 2013 Found. for Child Dev. (2013).

⁷ Gormley, W., Gayer, T., & Phillips, D.A., Preschool programs can boost school readiness. *Science*, 320, 1723-24 (2008).

⁸ "The Development of Cognitive and Academic Abilities: Growth Curves from an Early Childhood Educational Experiment", *Developmental Psychology* 37(2) 231-242. By Frances A. Campbell, Elizabeth P. Pungello, Shari Miller-Johnson, Margaret Burchinal, and Craig T. Ramey. (2001).

through early education. This research has shown that early childhood education may also reduce the need for special education placements and remedial education, which would in turn, lower public school costs.⁹

When expanding the results that came from the successes of the Perry Preschool, researcher James Heckman found that for every dollar spent on the program, a baseline estimate of \$8.60 was returned.¹⁰ Several studies corroborate this idea of a \$7.00 per child profit. Additionally, the participants went on to earn about 25 percent higher income per year when compared with nonparticipants. This higher percentage has the potential to have incredible repercussions on poverty, including generational poverty.

Education and crime also interact. Many studies show that when early childhood education is increased, society benefits through falling crime rates. The Heckman study of the Perry Preschool also suggested that participants were less likely to be involved with the criminal justice system, thus lightening the financial burden on society as it relates to spending on courts, prison systems, and law enforcement.

In the mid-1960s, Chicago Public Schools found itself facing many problems in Chicago's west side neighborhoods including low rates of school attendance, family disengagement with schools, and low student achievement. As a response to these problems Dr. Lorraine Sullivan, a superintendent for some of these west side schools, created the Chicago Child-Parent Centers program. This program was created to give children ages 3 and 4 access to early childhood

⁹ Anderson, Michael L. 2014. "Multiple Inference and Gender Differences in the Effects of Early Intervention: A Reevaluation of the Abecedarian, Perry Preschool, and Early Training Projects." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 103, no. 484: 1481-1495.

¹⁰ *The Economics of Early Childhood Investments* (President's Council of Econ. Advisers 2014), available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/early_childhood_report1.pdf.

education in order to succeed. It's goal was, "reach the child and parent early, develop language skills and self-confidence, and to demonstrate that these children, if given a chance, can meet successfully all the demands of today's technological, urban society."¹¹ Recent research showed that children who did not participate in the Child-Parent Centers preschool program in Chicago were found to 70% more likely to be arrested for violent crime by the age of 18.¹² This study, conducted by the Dr. Arthur Reynolds of the University of Wisconsin, followed 989 students enrolled in 20 Chicago Parent-Child Centers beginning at age three and a comparison group of 550 other eligible children who did not participate in the program until eighth grade.

Research is clear that there are numerous benefits to early childhood education and that these benefits can help to even the playing field between students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and their more privileged peers. So is there a second level of analysis that teachers should use before trusting this research implicitly?

Implicit Bias

Rutgers University's Department of Philosophy uses the definition "a subtle and pervasive form of bias against members of a group merely in virtue of their membership in that group" as its working definition of implicit bias. This is in contrast with explicit bias which is present in conscious, overt beliefs that are often manifested in the form of speech, actions, or policy. Implicit bias, on the other hand, most often consists of unconscious tacit attitudes and

¹¹ Chicago Public Schools, *Child Parent Center* (2016), available at <http://cps.edu/Schools/EarlyChildhood/Pages/Childparentcenter.aspx>.

¹² Reynolds, A.J. et al. (2001) Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest: a 15-Year Follow-Up of Low-income Children in Public Schools. *JAMA*.

unintentional actions, which may in fact be a direct conflict with the person's explicit beliefs and values. The scientific idea of implicit bias suggests that as humans, we do not always have conscious or intention control over the processes of our minds, especially because human minds are molded by many outside social factors.¹³ Implicit biases are harbored in our subconscious and dictate not only our feelings and attitudes, but also some actions toward others based on characteristics such as race, age, disability, and others. These biases are formed by social factors such as talking with others, watching television, observing interactions between other peoples, and even in indirect ways. Because implicit biases are exactly that—implicit and not conscious choices that we make every day—these biases affect how we interact with others.

There are many examples of implicit bias in society, generally. Let's take implicit bias in the medical field, for example. Heart disease is the number one cause of death for both women and men in the United States, but it is still often thought of to be a "man's disease". In fact, more women than men have died each year from cardiovascular-related causes since 1984. Researchers began to realize that there was a gender gap when it came to the diagnoses of heart disease in women. A psychologist named Gabrielle R. Chiaramonte led a series of studies in 2008 to determine why the gender gap existed. In the first study, 230 family doctors and internists were asked to evaluate two hypothetical patients: a 47-year-old man and a 56-year-old woman. Both had identical risk factors which included chest pain, shortness of breath, and irregular heartbeat. Half of the patient notes included a comment that the patient had recently

¹³ Anthony G. Greenwald & Linda Hamilton Krieger, Implicit Bias: Scientific Foundations, 94 Cal. L. Rev. 945, 946 (2006).

experienced a stressful life event and appeared to be anxious. In the patient notes that did not contain that comment, there was no difference between the doctors' recommendations to the woman and man. These studies ultimately showed that doctors were misdiagnosing female cardiac patients – but not male patients – when one of the symptoms listed was “stress”. When “stress” was not listed as a symptom, and only the physical symptoms remained in the notes, there was no gender difference in diagnosis. “The presence of stress, the researchers explained, sparked a ‘meaning shift’ in which women’s physical symptoms were reinterpreted as psychological, while ‘men’s symptoms were perceived as organic whether or not stressors were present.’”¹⁴

This is just one example of a profession that can unknowingly use implicit bias to make serious determinations. Similar to the healthcare profession, teaching is a profession that draws impassioned, well-intentioned individuals who find satisfaction in investing in the futures and successes of others. But this passion does not immune teachers from implicit bias. A study conducted in 2010 looked at teachers’ implicit biases focused on ethnicity and race. It found that implicit biases were singularly responsible for expectations of achievements for students of different races. Teachers expected less success from their students of color, showing that even the most goodhearted of people can have negative effects on their students, ones that can be very damaging.¹⁵

¹⁴ Maya Dusenbery, *Is Medicine’s Gender Bias Killing Young Women?*, 2015 Pac. Standard Mag.

¹⁵ Linda van den Bergh, Eddie Denessen, Lisette Hornstra, Marinus Voeten, and Rob W. Holland, "The Implicit Prejudiced Attitudes of Teachers: Relations to Teacher Expectations and the Ethnic Achievement Gap," *American Educational Research Journal* 47 (2010): 497–527.

A study conducted by Victor Lavy and Edith Sand and published in the National Bureau of Economic Research found that girls often score higher than boys on name-blind math tests, but when teachers are presented with names that are easily associable with a gender, teachers score the male-sounding names higher. This simple manifestation of implicit bias can have very serious effects on the lives of these students, often amplified by socioeconomic factors and family structure. The research also showed that students from families in lower socioeconomic communities were the most negatively affected. In a groundbreaking study published in 2015 entitled, “Black Girls Matter: Pushed out, overpoliced, and underprotected” researchers focused on the heightened vulnerability of Black girls’ in the school setting. The study showed that Black girls were suspended 6 times as often as white girls, and even though Black children make up less than 20% of preschoolers, they make up more than 50% of out-of-school suspensions. The literature used for the study suggests that Black girls face higher risks of suspensions and expulsions, essentially, for behavior that is disproportionately punished in girls, but accommodated in boys. The researchers found data to support the idea that perhaps Black girls are categorically subjected to harsher disciplinary interventions because “they are perceived to be unruly, loud, and unmanageable.”¹⁶ One study revealed that teachers sometimes exercised disciplinary measures against Black girls to encourage them to adopt more “acceptable” qualities of femininity, such as being quieter and more passive.¹⁷

¹⁶ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Priscilla Ocen & Jyoti Nanda, *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected* (African Am. Policy Forum 2015).

¹⁷ Blake, Jamilia J., Bettie Ray Butler, Chance W. Lewis, and Alicia Darenbourg. “Unmasking the Inequitable Discipline Experiences of Urban Black Girls: Implications for Urban Educational Stakeholders.” *The Urban Review* 43, no. 1 (2011): 90-94.

In public schools in the United States, 83.5% of the teaching force is White, with 6.9% Black, 6.6% Hispanic, 1.3% Asian, 0.2% Pacific Islander, 0.5% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and .9% two or more races.¹⁸ Because the American teaching force is predominately White, therefore it most likely shares implicit biases in favor of White/Eurocentric peoples.¹⁹

In places like Chicago where almost 40% of the student racial makeup is Black, this means that there is very little representation for Black students. And as the research on implicit bias has suggested, these unconscious choices have the capacity to have—and have for many children from communities of color— disastrous effects on their education. Until educators realize the existence of implicit biases and the need to actively confront them, the spaces that were purported to improve lives – spaces like early child education – will not meet potential success, the accomplishments and improvement of lives we know are achievable.

Confronting Implicit Bias

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University published an article in July 2015 which sought to offer strategies for addressing implicit bias in early childhood education.²⁰ Researchers realized that implicit bias could be a barrier to a student's ability to reach their full potential, and teachers should be breaking down barriers as opposed to creating or sustaining them. Quite simply, researchers recognized that “biases, even if held by good people, can still produce a variety of negative effects if left unchecked.”

¹⁸ NCES, DIGEST OF EDUCATION STATISTICS 2010, at Table 74. Percentage of public school teachers of grades 9 through 12, by field of main teaching assignment and selected demographic and educational characteristics: 2007-08, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_074.asp.

¹⁹ Sarah E. Redfield & Theresa Kraft, *What Color Is Special Education?*, 41 J.L. & Educ. 129, 192–93 (2012).

²⁰ Kelly Capatosto, *Strategies for Addressing Implicit Bias in Early Childhood Education*, The Kirwin Inst. (2015).

Some of the most effective ways of confronting implicit bias come should come from the institution itself in order to prevent biases from permeating the culture of the entire school. Some of these methods are obvious—increasing the representations of races, gender, and other distinguishing factors in the teacher population; establishing across-the-board high expectations of students no matter their socioeconomic status, disability, community, etc.; engaging in staff development around this topic, keeping it on the forefront of teachers’ and administrators’ minds.

Teachers themselves must also be mindful of the biases that can affect their individual classrooms. Teachers can help to foster open discussions or directed play that seeks to increase interactions between students who have obvious differences. Teachers can also make the classroom a place that celebrates diversity in different forms—cultural, racial, disability, and more. When early childhood education teachers challenge their students to tasks like problem-solving or creative tasks, teachers can establish positive intergroup contact between different students in order to both enhance the students’ experience in the classroom and implicit bias at the same time.

Conclusion

The benefits of early childhood education have been proven. Teachers should continue to cultivate these successes by confronting their own implicit biases so as to not interrupt or impede the learning process of their students. Children ages 3-5 in early childhood education environments are incredibly malleable. In fact, numerous studies show that three, four, and five year olds not only categorize people around them by race, but also that they can use learned

racial categories to include or exclude others.²¹ When teachers confront bias in the classroom, it can help even the youngest of students confront their own as well. It is a learning experience in and of itself, and one that can be critical to a student's ability to reach their full potential. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically." When teachers confront implicit bias, even in the context of early childhood education, they are actively thinking critically and teaching their pupils to do the same in order to create an environment in which their students can succeed.

²¹ Erin N. Winkler, Ph.D., *Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race*, 3 HighReach Learning® Inc. (2009).