Learning In Mixed Company:
Study Shows Low-Income Preschoolers Learn Better, Faster Alongside More Affluent Peers

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A new study by St. Joseph College in West Hartford has found that low-income children attending preschool alongside more affluent children learned vocabulary and language skills six times faster than if they were schooled exclusively with other low-income children.

Preschool is often cited as the best way to help low-income children catch up to their middle-income peers, but now it seems the most progress is made when children from different economic backgrounds are put in the same classrooms.

The highly focused study looked only at children in selected preschools, and did not take into account other factors that affect learning, such as parental involvement or methods of teaching. The preschools were all accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which sets standards for quality education.

Researchers say the study raises questions about how preschool can best be delivered in Connecticut. Although the state spends about $40 million each year to send 3- and 4-year-olds from impoverished backgrounds to preschool, many of these children are attending preschools that are economically segregated.

"There has been very little data gathered about this, although it is a question that people ask a lot," said Walter S. Gilliam of Yale's Child Study Center, who read the study's findings.

The study focused on seven preschool centers in West Hartford. Two served only low-income children, while the other five, including the School for Young Children at St. Joseph College School, mixed youngsters from different economic backgrounds. No more than 20 percent of children in the integrated programs came from low-income families, (their tuition paid by the state under its school-readiness initiative).

Researcher Carlota Schechter, assistant professor of education at St. Joseph College, tested the vocabulary and language skills of the children when they entered the programs as 3-year-olds. She held up flashcards and asked children to name the objects or actions represented in the picture.

The children were tested again after six months in their respective programs.

In the beginning, Schecter found no significant differences among low-income children. The children's vocabulary scores were consistently below both the national average and the scores of the more affluent children that she tested.

But six months later, the low-income children who attended the integrated programs showed remarkable gains. Not only did they gain vocabulary at six times the rate of low-income children in the economically segregated programs (who also showed a marked improvement); these children also caught up to their more affluent peers.

The low-income children in economically diverse programs gained vocabulary at 3.5 times the rate of the affluent children, the study showed.

"Clearly there are more gains in integrated sites. You are closing the gap," said Beth Bye, director of the School for Young Children at St. Joseph College, who estimates that less than 10 percent of Connecticut preschools serve children from diverse economic backgrounds.

Schechter said it is likely that children from more affluent families, who generally arrive at preschool with better language skills than their low-income peers, serve as role models.

"If you ask most people in early childhood education, they believe most language development happens through peer modeling. That's why we integrate special education students into mainstream classrooms," Schechter said.

These preliminary findings have a tremendous significance for closing the so-called achievement gap between children from different economic backgrounds, according to researchers, who are expanding the study.

Children with larger vocabularies are generally much more successful at learning to read, while the latest studies on the brain show children pick up the most language around the ages of 3 and 4. It is difficult for children without these language skills to catch up once they reach kindergarten.

Elaine Zimmerman, executive director of the Connecticut Commission on Children, said the study makes a good argument for "cross-class education."

"I think it is great they are looking at language because we know that one-third of children from low-income communities enter kindergarten already behind their peers," Zimmerman said. "By fourth-grade, more than half of these children will not meet the standard for reading proficiency."

Lawmakers tried to encourage economic diversity in preschool programs when they passed the states' school readiness initiative in 1997. Today, about 6,300 needy youngsters attend preschool, at a cost to the state of more than $40 million. Private preschools that open up slots for low-income children under this program become eligible to receive state funds.

"For some programs, this is pretty good money. For others, it is about half of what it costs to provide that child with preschool," said Yale's Gilliam. "There are a lot of

financial disincentives for high quality programs to take low-income children. High quality programs cost more."

In Hartford, the majority of preschools that receive school readiness money are serving only low-income children, said Judy Goldfarb, executive director of the Hartford Area Childcare Collaborative. There are exceptions, like the preschool center at Trinity College, which serves neighborhood children and the offspring of faculty and students, she said.

The researchers are now looking to expand the study to see if they get the same results with broader samples.

"This is a great jumping off point for a 10-year study," Bye said.