



Preschool education for Hispanics

By Michael J. Garcia, Ph. D.

Research into the effectiveness of preschool education programs has shown, for example, that at risk preschool-aged children (ages 3-5) who received preschool education, showed significant gains in development and learning. Perhaps of most importance to Hispanics in the U.S. as we seek to better our status in this country through education, is, therefore, preschool education. When we consider that Hispanics have a nationwide pushout (not "dropout") rate of about 50 percent in our public schools (80 percent in New York City), it is a horrendous human tragedy that so many of our kind are not predicted to complete their high school education.

The loss of such a human resource potential to this nation and our people is too costly to allow such a waste to occur. The magnitude of this waste of human resources is better appreciated, for example, if you were to line up all Hispanics in our nation age 5 to 19 years old (about five million) and tell half of them (about 2.5 million) that they can forget about getting a high school diploma. Hence, we need to consider more closely how preschool education can, perhaps, be of help to Hispanic children at risk of scholastic failure.

If we define "at risk" children as those living below poverty level, we should keep in mind that one quarter of our Hispanic population (about 4,235,000) live below poverty level, and that the poverty rate for Hispanics is twice the rate for non-Hispanics (25 percent and 11 percent respectively). Yet only about 40 percent of four-year-olds from families (Hispanic and non-Hispanic) below poverty level are enrolled in some kind of preschool education program nationwide today. Although 65 percent of about half a million children served nationwide by such preschool education programs as Head Start are Hispanic, Black, and other minorities, we are not reaching as many Hispanic children as necessary. We need to make sure, therefore, that we make preschool education available for as many Hispanic preschool-age children as possible who are living below poverty level.

The first crop of Hispanic high school graduates in the year 2000 are being born about now, we owe it to them to make it possible to benefit from the positive findings about preschool education to date, and enroll them in preschool education programs. The consequences of not doing so may be more harmful than we would like. The consequences, on the other hand, of enrolling our Hispanic children in preschool education programs may be that twelve or so years down the line, we might stand a greater chance of reaping the benefits of their scholastic and academic success. This success might in turn result in lower school pushout rates, lower number of households headed by females with no husband present, and lower unemployment rates for Hispanics nationwide. Here's why:

When we consider the current findings on the impact of preschool education, we may indeed be able to lower the future pushout rate from school for Hispanics. According to findings from longitudinal studies on the effects of preschool education, socioeconomically at risk children who take part in preschool programs tend to do better scholastically later in school and are more likely to complete high school (Schweinhart et al, 1985). Children participating in such programs as Head Start adapted better to school, made more regular progress, and stayed in their classes more often.

Another hope for preschool education as an intervention for Hispanics is the possible impact on diminishing unwanted teenage pregnancies and childbirths, and the effect that they have on girls leaving school. It was found, for instance, that females who attended preschool education programs reported less teenage pregnancies than females who did not attend preschool education. In addition, of the females who reported teenage pregnancies, those females who had attended preschool programs were more likely to complete high school than females who did not attend preschool education programs. With an almost 25 percent of all Hispanic household headed, nationwide, by females with no husband present, and to the extent that unwanted teenage pregnancies contribute to the number of such single parent households, preschool education may also help decrease this statistic by helping diminish unwanted teenage pregnancies for Hispanic girls.

Research into preschool education also shows that children taking part in preschool programs are less likely to be candidates for welfare later on. In other words, through preschool education for Hispanics, we may also be able to impact on the high unemployment rate for Hispanics which is substantially higher for Hispanics than for non-Hispanics (41.3 percent and 7.4 percent respectively). Some of the data, for example, from studying the effects of Head Start programs after twenty years in existence, shows that children from such programs had a higher employment rate at age 19 than those children who did not attend such preschool programs.

A good number, but not enough, of Hispanic children who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and therefore potentially at risk for school failure are already being served through regular Head Start programs and Migrant Head Start programs. Of equal importance, however, for preschool education for Hispanics is the need to identify at risk children through criteria other than just socioeconomic status, i.e., living below poverty level. We should not overlook other Hispanic 3-to 5-year-olds who are at risk scholastically even though they live above the poverty level.

Another cohort of Hispanic preschool children who could be enrolled in preschool education are those children whose elementary-grade brothers and sisters are underachieving for their grade level. Public schools would need to monitor achievement level for Hispanic children in grades K-6. This data would then provide a possible indicator as to whether their preschool-age siblings might qualify for being potentially "at risk" for purposes of being enrolled in preschool education programs. Doing this for Hispanic preschool age children would possibly help them from repeating the scholastic failure of their K-6 brothers and sisters.

The bottom line is this: let's identify as many potential scholastically at risk Hispanic preschoolers (ages 3-5) as possible, and provide the opportunity for their parents to voluntarily enroll them in developmentally appropriate preschool education programs.

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