

Extended Abstract

Statement of Problem

Postsecondary credentials earned through educational and training programs after high school are key determinants of financial advancement in the information-based U.S. economy of the 21st century (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins, 2008). A high school diploma no longer guarantees the income necessary to support parents, especially single parents, and their children. On average, adults with only a high school diploma earn 20% to 40% less per week than adults with an associate's or bachelor's degree (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Although enrollment rates at postsecondary institutions have increased by almost 30% in recent decades, rates of postsecondary completion have not kept pace (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, Maseo, & Kienzl, 2009). Moreover, this problem of low-completion has been particularly acute for those with the least economic resources, especially low-income mothers with children.

Low postsecondary credentialing rates among poor mothers do not appear to stem from mothers' lack of interest in education. In fact, a sizeable minority (about 25%) of teenage mothers eventually pursue postsecondary education, though often not until many years after the birth of their first child (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; Rich & Kim, 1999). Low-income mothers often delay or forgo postsecondary education, not because they are uninterested or unaware of the benefits, but because they find it virtually impossible to meet the requirements of postsecondary programs while navigating complicated welfare regulations, an often inaccessible and low-quality child care system, inflexible and unpredictable work schedules, family demands, turbulent romantic relationships, and a variety of other inter- and intra-personal stressors.

The goal of this paper is to outline a possible framework for a more effective approach to the promotion of postsecondary enrollment and completion by low-income mothers of young children. We will present (1) theory and empirical evidence that outline the critical importance of on-time postsecondary education; (2) findings from a small qualitative study that explores the supports and obstacles faced by a sample of low-income mothers of young children at three high-quality early childhood centers; and (3) preliminary ideas for a new intervention model that uses early childhood education programs as the point of access for enhancing low-income mothers' postsecondary achievement.

Theory and Relevant Empirical Knowledge

Why promote postsecondary education of low-income mothers with young children (ages 0 to 5 years)? Why not wait until the stresses associated with the care of young children have diminished and address a mother's earning potential and postsecondary education later in life when her children are in school? This paper will incorporate economic, sociological, and developmental theories to consider the important relationships between a mother's education, family income and child well-being. It will do so by considering the importance of postsecondary education in the development of human capital (Becker, 1993; Foster, 2002; Mayer, 1997); the timing of human capital investments in the life course of families (Heckman, 2006; Duncan & Magnuson, 2004); and the theory of linked lives and the interdependence of children and their parents (Elder, 1994; Brooks-Gunn, Elder, & Phelps, 1991). Positive

associations between maternal education and children's academic and cognitive outcomes are among the most consistent relations found in the developmental psychology literature, although more work exploring causality is needed (e.g., Magnuson, 2007) See figure 1. A two-generation approach –educational interventions for children as well as parents-- is essential to the well-being of families and possibly to breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Chase-Lansdale & Votruba-Drzal, 2004).

Qualitative Study and Findings

Little is known about the best methods to promote the postsecondary enrollment and completion of low-income mothers with children, a population facing a complex array of institutional, financial, and intra- and inter-personal barriers that often limit their postsecondary success. Given the well-documented findings on the importance of early childhood education for young children's development, especially for those who face economic hardship, we have chosen to study a population of mothers of young children enrolled in an exemplary, publicly and privately-funded early childhood education program known as Educare. Mothers were randomly selected from ethnically and racially diverse Educare sites in Chicago, Denver, and Miami (see Table 1). Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 51 mothers and 17 focus groups of teachers and leadership and family support staff.

Data are being coded and analyzed using the qualitative analysis program Nvivo. In addition to our review of prior and existing educational interventions for low-income populations, we are supplementing this analysis with interviews of 20-25 experts in workforce development, postsecondary education, youth initiatives, and adult education to further inform our proposed intervention design.

A preliminary analysis of our data indicates the following themes:

- **Low-income parents, like most parents, have accepted the view that the goal of college is an important one for themselves and their children in our current economy. How well-prepared and motivated these young mothers are to achieve this goal varies widely.**
- **Some mothers are especially cognizant that the demands of work, school, family, and the daily stress of limited resources all compete for their time, diminishing their capacity to address the emotional needs of their very young children and pursue their education goals at the same time.**
- **Of those who are motivated, a key reason seems to be their dedication to their children's current and future learning and educational achievement.**
- **There is considerable individual variation among mothers' in their academic, emotional and life skills preparation for pursuing education beyond high school.**
- **Employers play a critical role in the educational success or failure of low-income mothers.**

- **In order to work, attend school, or both, many mothers expressed a need for high quality, flexible, affordable child care or early education programs – like Educare – in which they know their children are safe, secure, and learning.**

Preliminary Ideas for New Intervention

The goal of this research is to build on the existing network of successful early childhood education programs and to add a new component directed at mothers' educational attainment. We believe that this idea holds promise because it capitalizes on the commitment parents have made to their young children's learning by enrolling their child(ren) in a state-of-the-art early childhood education program, and because it builds on existing, trusting relationships among centers parents, teachers, and staff. As parents witness their children flourishing, they have the peace of mind to focus on their own educational needs and the future of their families

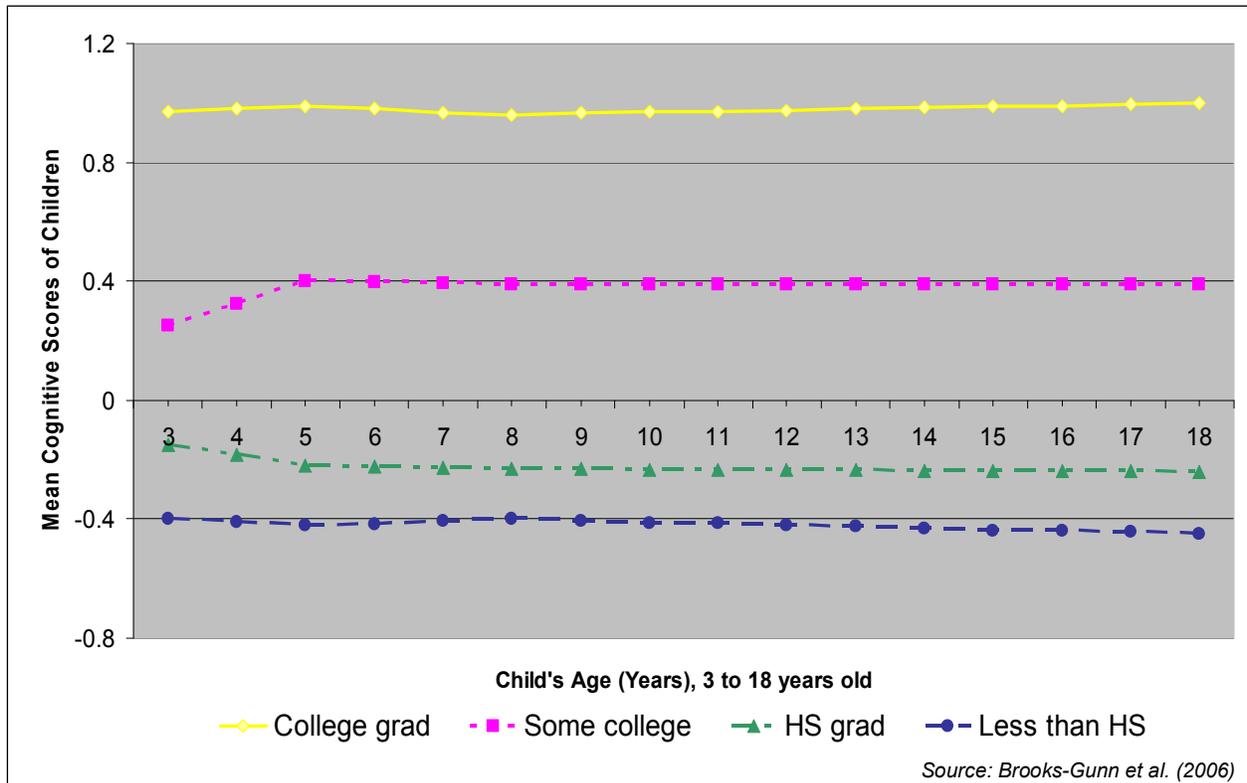
From our research and preliminary analysis to date, we have begun to consider possible program components. These components may include a full-time professional on-site at the early childhood education centers to support all education-related needs; tutors for promoting and reinforcing reading, writing, and math skills; computers and a private space for parents to learn about educational options as well as to organize themselves and study with the needed tools; non-standard child care hours for evening and weekend classes; and partnerships with local educational institutions and employers. The long-term goal of such a program would be to harness the energy and commitment mothers have made to their children's education and apply it to the pursuit of their own studies. As one staff member explained:

Once they've accepted the importance of their education for their children and get involved in homework and getting to day care, I see that as a huge success. I think for a lot of my parents, what we have brought to them is the importance of the education for their children. That's the motivating factor for successful children and successful families.

Table 1. Total Population of Chicago, Denver, and Miami Educare Centers: Demographic Information

	Chicago	Denver	Miami
Number of children	159	184	130
Ethnicity of children (%)			
African-American	98	39	--
Hispanic/Latino	--	48	79
White	--	--	8
Other	2	13	5
Mothers' education (%)			
Less than HS	54	29	5
HS grad/GED	22	29	29
Some college	9	33	33
College graduate	15	9	13

Figure 1: Higher Levels of Mothers' Education are Linked to Children's Higher Cognitive Development



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