

Helping Students from Low-Income Families

by Barak Rosenshine, PhD

Introduction

Students from low-income families need instruction that provides a strong, systematic, teacher-led focus on academics. Because these students do not have the family learning environment that middle-class students have, they need much more academic time than is contained in a typical school day and year.

It is academic time, not simply time, that is important. Simply providing more time for non-academic activities, or unfocused academic activities, is not sufficient.

There are six settings where additional academic instruction has been provided for students from low-income families, and empirical studies have shown that this additional academic instruction has resulted in increased student achievement.

1. Academic preschool or academic Head Start
2. Academic kindergarten
3. Smaller classes
4. Additional time at the end of the school day
5. Saturday classes
6. Academic summer school

Academic Preschool

The Chicago Child-Parent Center (CPC) program, funded through the U.S. Title I program, is a preschool program that provides structured academic activities, health services, a parental program, and academic support from grade 1 to grade 3.

A longitudinal study of 1,539 five-year olds from the program at age 20 found that, compared to control children, the CPC students had a 29% higher rate of high school completion and lower grade retention and drop-out rates.

Based on their analysis, the researchers found that attendance in the preschool program for 18 months — averaging a cost of US\$6,692 per child — generated a return to society of US\$47,000 per participant.

www.communityschools.org/newsletter15.html

www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls/NEWSLETTER2.PDF

www.news.wisc.edu/releases/8632.html

Academic Kindergarten

There have been a number of schools where students from low-income families were reading at grade level at the end of grade 4. In many of these schools, students were began a beginning reading program in kindergarten and were decoding fluently when they entered grade 1.

However, for this advantage to be effective, there had to be a continuing focused academic program throughout the elementary school grades.

Smaller Classes

There have been three large-scale studies where class-size was reduced: in Tennessee, California, and Milwaukee. Gains were strong in Tennessee, mixed in Milwaukee, and non-existent in California. But it was only in Milwaukee that the investigators also looked at instruction in the smaller classes. They found that when teachers were unfocused and unable to manage their classrooms, then having smaller classes didn't help any. The money spent on smaller classes was wasted for those teachers. But when teachers of smaller classes were academically focused, task-centered, and able to manage their classrooms, then students from low-income families made greater progress than was made by similar students in larger classrooms. Observations showed that teachers in smaller classes were better able to assess the progress of all their students and provide feedback and corrections and these activities led to increased student achievement.

Additional Academic Time

There are a number of schools in the US, which primarily serve students from low-income backgrounds and whose students consistently achieve at grade level and above. KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) began as a single school in 1994 and today there are 38 middle schools in 15 states. This program of rigorous academic instruction has been successful in raising student achievement wherever it has been tried. Over 80% of KIPP students qualify for the U.S. federally-subsidized meal program, and all KIPP schools have been highly successful. All the students in the KIPP schools are self-selected and the students and their parents are highly motivated. Students in KIPP schools are in school from 7:30 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. on weekdays, for four hours on Saturdays and for three to four weeks during the summer. Students complete between two and three hours of homework each night.

The YES College Preparatory Schools in Houston, Texas, the Amistad Academy in New Haven, Connecticut, and the Codman Academy in Dorchester, Massachusetts are all similar to the KIPP schools. All are charter schools, all students are self-selected and all schools have extended hours during the week, classes on Saturday, and classes during part of the summer.

If these selective, rigorous, and demanding programs require a large amount of additional time after school, on Saturday, and during the summer, then additional time is even more necessary in low-income schools where the students are not motivated and self-selected and where the school instructional program is not as focused and demanding.

www.kipp.org

<http://codmanacademy.org/main/index.php>

www.yesprep.org

www.achievementfirst.org

Conclusion

As shown above, not all preschools are successful in raising academic achievement for students from low-income families, but the CPC program which included academics and parent involvement was successful. Not all kindergartens are successful, but those kindergartens that included phonics-based beginning reading were successful in providing an initial framework. Not all class size reduction was successful, but reducing class size was important for academically-focused teachers who were able to use the setting to provide more feedback and guidance for students. Not all extended days or Saturday classes are successful, but the KIPP program, which uses the time for academics, was successful.

In sum, providing a new structure, or more funds, or more time is not sufficient. Success comes from how these structures and funds and time are used. Reducing class size, in itself, is not effective if the opportunity is used poorly. Providing more time in preschool, on Saturdays and in the summer, is not sufficient unless the time is used well. But simply focusing on academics in the classroom is also not adequate because students from low-income families need more time than can be provided in the usual school day or the usual school year. The payoff for these students comes from a combination of focused, well-managed academic instruction plus the additional time they need.

Dr. Rosenshine is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Illinois. A recent publication is "Converging Findings on Classroom Instruction," a chapter in the 300-page report, School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence. The January 22, 2002 report, edited by Alex Molnar and published by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University, is available on the Internet at www.asu.edu/educ/eps/I/EPRU/documents/EPRU%202002-101/Chapter%2009-Rosenshine-Final.pdf
