

Ready for kindergarten? Gap between rich and poor narrows, study finds

29 August 2016, by Clifton B. Parker



The achievement gap between high- and lower-income children entering kindergarten has narrowed – in spite of widening economic inequality, according to new Stanford education research. Credit: monkeybusinessimages / Getty Images

On the first day of kindergarten, poor children are already behind.

But the distance they need to cover to start school on par with richer kids has shortened – in spite of widening economic inequality – according to surprising new research co-authored by Stanford Graduate School of Education (GSE) Professor Sean Reardon.

The study, conducted with Stanford GSE alumna Ximena Portilla, compared the achievement gaps between high- and lower-income children entering kindergarten in 1998 and 2010 using the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS). It was published Aug. 26 in AERA Open, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association.

The ECLS tests early literacy and numeracy to

gauge how ready children are for kindergarten: Can they identify letters? Sound out words? Count? Recognize shapes and colors? These skills have grown in importance, as U.S. kindergarten classrooms have become more academically demanding.

Reardon and Portilla found that the gap between high- and lower-income students was 16 percent smaller for reading and 10 percent smaller for math in 2010 compared to 1998.

The gap between rich and [poor kids](#) at the start of schooling matters because differences in achievement by income do not change much as children go from kindergarten to higher grades.

Reardon said, "Most of the action seems to be before kids get to kindergarten. If you can get them to kindergarten on a more even footing, there is a much better chance that they are going to stay on that more even footing as they progress through school."

Moreover, the decreasing gaps represent a sharp reversal of a widening divergence observed in prior decades. While educational [achievement gaps](#) between black and Hispanic children with respect to white peers have been narrowing for decades, the achievement gap between rich and poor kids grew by 40 percent between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, as wealthy parents were increasingly spending more time and money on their children, according to Reardon's previous research.

That the reversal of this trend happened in the 2000s was even more surprising.

"Poor kids in 2010 were living in worse economic circumstances than poor kids in 1998," said Reardon, a faculty affiliate of the Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis.

Compared to 1998, the parents of low-income

children in 2010 were more likely to be unemployed, speak a language other than English, have an education of high school or less, be of Hispanic origin and have been unmarried when the children were born.

And these socioeconomic changes affected poor kids disproportionately – widening economic and social disparities with respect to rich kids. "We expected that things had gotten worse – certainly not that they have gotten better," Reardon said.

Cognitive stimulation

So, why did the gap narrow?

There is evidence that young children are being exposed to more enriching home environments, and that the growth in this exposure has been greater for low-income kids.

The findings are in another AERA Open paper by Reardon co-authored with Stanford doctoral student Jenna Finch, GSE alumna Daphna Bassok (now at the University of Virginia), and RaeHyuck Lee and Jane Waldfogel, both of Columbia University.

Using data from the ECLS, the researchers found that families of kindergarteners in 2010 had more books at home, read more to their kids, reported taking them to libraries and museums more often, and made greater use of educational computer games, compared to 1998.

"In many cases the increase in those activities is greater among low-income families than among high-income families, so poor families have been catching up in terms of the cognitively stimulating activities that young kids are experiencing," Reardon said.

One factor that might have contributed to this is the growing public awareness of early childhood's importance for children's cognitive development. Efforts like First 5 California, the Thirty Million Words Initiative and Reach Out and Read have sought to give parents information and tools to promote their children's development.

"Such campaigns have probably influenced low-income parents more than high-income parents who were already doing many of those things," Reardon said.

And there is reason to believe that increasing investment in some of these activities by low-income families may yield relatively higher returns. Going from zero to 10 books may have a stronger impact on literacy readiness than going from 100 to 110 books in the home, for instance.

In contrast, Reardon and his co-authors did not find strong evidence to support that changes in public preschool participation contributed to narrowing the gap. It may be that the rates of enrollment in preschool did not change too dramatically over this time period for lower-income children. That does not necessarily mean that preschools did not play a role in narrowing the gap.

"It may be that the kinds of publicly funded preschool programs that poor kids attend have improved. There has been a lot of emphasis on preschool quality – but we can't measure that in the data we had," Reardon said.

Still, the gap between rich and poor kids remains large. Reardon estimates that lower-income [children](#) were testing the equivalent of about six months behind in reading and seven months behind in math compared to higher income kids in 2010.

"But, the fact that the gap turned around suggests that these gaps are not an immutable law of nature. Even when there is high inequality, they can be changed," Reardon said.

More information: S. F. Reardon et al. Recent Trends in Income, Racial, and Ethnic School Readiness Gaps at Kindergarten Entry, *AERA Open* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/2332858416657343](https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858416657343)

D. Bassok et al. Socioeconomic Gaps in Early Childhood Experiences: 1998 to 2010, *AERA Open* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/2332858416653924](https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858416653924)

Provided by Stanford University

APA citation: Ready for kindergarten? Gap between rich and poor narrows, study finds (2016, August 29) retrieved 17 October 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-08-ready-kindergarten-gap-rich-poor.html>

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