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Upward Mobility

By Fareed Zakaria

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America has long been seen--by its citizens and the world--as the place where anyone can make it. And yet studies from the past two decades all point to a different reality. Economic mobility in the U.S. is low compared with what it was in times past and with current levels in many European countries and Canada. It is particularly sticky at the two ends of the economic ladder. Rich people rarely become poor in a generation--and the poorest seldom get rich. Despite the rags-to-riches myth, such stories are the exception. A comprehensive study by the Pew Economic Mobility Project documents that in the U.S. today, few poor people become even upper middle class.

That's why President Obama's proposal to expand early-childhood education is vitally important: the idea is to provide high-quality pre-K for 4-year-olds from families whose incomes are at or below 200% of the poverty line--that is at or below \$47,000 for a family of four. Children born into poor or dysfunctional families must have pathways up, especially if they have the talent to succeed. And the more we learn about neuroscience, the clearer it becomes that the human brain develops much sooner than we had believed. Early stimulation and education can be highly effective.

Some of the criticism of Obama's program has come from the usual ideological opponents, though this is a program squarely aimed at creating greater equality of opportunity, not outcome. Other critics share his goals but worry about the government's track record in the area. Specifically, they point to Head Start, the long-standing program that provides early education to disadvantaged children. The Department of Health and Human Services released a study of Head Start in 2010, updated in 2012, that concludes that the program's positive effects begin to fade within a few years. This has led many to call it a failure and urge the government not to throw good money after bad.

But critics are jumping to conclusions about a very complicated subject without really understanding the study--or **the limitations of social-science research**. In a June 2012 paper, three scholars from the University of

Chicago and University of California, Davis, painstakingly explained why it is premature to reject Head Start. They note that **many factors may have intervened** to erode the early gains in scores, including **sharp rises in single-parent families, non-English-speaking households and severe health problems like childhood obesity and diabetes**. They also noted that early education in public schools has been getting better, a trend that might explain why Head Start kids lose their advantage over non-Head Start kids. Most important, some studies show that though their test scores level out, children who have been through early education do better in their professional lives.

Look at the data from the rest of the world. A 2012 report from the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concludes that early-childhood education "improves children's cognitive abilities, helps to create a foundation for lifelong learning, makes learning outcomes more equitable, reduces poverty and improves social mobility from generation to generation."

This conclusion is based on data from 34 rich countries, many of which outperform the U.S. in educational achievement and--now--economic mobility. In many of these countries, 90% of 3-year-olds get early-childhood education. The OECD average for 4-year-olds is 81%. In the U.S., it is only 69%, and those children tend to be from middle- and upper-middle-class families.

European countries provide universal (or almost universal) general education and day-care programs that focus on whole-child learning, unlike American ones, which are often more limited and target only the poor. The U.S.--the government and private sector combined--also spends much less on early-childhood education as a percentage of GDP, ranking 24th of the 34 countries surveyed by the OECD, and has a higher-than-average student-to-teacher ratio. Additionally, America's poor children suffer more than Europe's from malnutrition, which has an effect on the ability to learn.

American government, working locally for the most part, set the pace for education in the past 150 years. By the second half of the 19th century, mass elementary education was the norm across the nation. It would take other industrializing countries three to four decades to catch up, write scholars Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz in their book *The Race Between Education and Technology*. "Human capital became supreme in the 20th century and America led the way."

That lead is now gone. Head Start should be reformed to ensure its effectiveness. But Obama's proposals will help the U.S. start to catch up in the great human-capital struggle that will define the new century even more dramatically than it did the last.

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The original version of this article said the paper by scholars from the University of Chicago and University of California, Davis was published in September 2011. While released as a working paper in 2011, the version referenced in the column was presented in June 2012



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