

Upfront

Mind the Gap: Some social and educational programs inadvertently widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

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When “Sesame Street” went on the air in 1969, its creators hoped that it would promote the intellectual development of preschoolers, especially poor and minority children. Five years later, however, studies showed that “Sesame Street” actually widened the gap between the haves and have-nots, with middle-class viewers reaping more cognitive gains than their lower-class counterparts.

In the February-March 2005 issue of *American Psychologist*, Cornell University researchers Stephen J. Ceci and Paul B. Papierno suggest that this gap-widening effect is not uncommon among broadly disseminated, universal interventions. They also give two reasons for why the gap happens: First, the haves may be more willing or able to access the program than are the have-nots. In the case of “Sesame Street” in the 1970s, for example, the higher a child’s social class, the more often he or she watched the show.

Second, even if both the haves and the have-nots use the program equally, the haves may possess additional cognitive, cultural, social, or economic tools with which to buttress its offerings. So, in the “Sesame Street” example, higher-class parents were more likely to use toys, books, and games to reinforce the show’s lessons than were lower-class parents.

In contrast to universal interventions, targeted interventions may more effectively narrow the have/have-not gap, the authors

write. Targeted efforts are given to specific groups that have cognitive, educational, economic, or social disadvantages, and “raise the floor without also raising the ceiling,” says Ceci.

Ceci and Papierno wrote the article not only to alert researchers and policymakers to the possible unintended effects of universal interventions, but also to “spark a national discussion about our moral, political, and historical lack of consensus on what to do about individual differences.” Specifically, they ask, “Is increasing the gap between the less and the more advantaged ... necessarily an undesirable outcome?”

On the one hand, large have/have-not divides are not just a moral and humanitarian stain, but are also the makings of illness and civil instability. For example, Harvard School of Public Health professor Ichiro Kawachi has shown that the higher an area’s overall income inequality, the worse its overall health. Likewise, McMaster University professors Margo Wilson and Martin Daly have demonstrated that homicide rates increase with levels of income inequality.

On the other hand, both the have-nots and the haves seem to need all the help they can get in the United States. The authors cite international comparisons of academic achievement indicating that America’s top students most closely resemble only the middling students of our main trading partners like China and Japan. If universal interventions could help America’s haves be more competitive in the international

marketplace, the authors ask, wouldn’t some widening of the gap be worth it?

Ceci tends to think not, slightly favoring targeted interventions for both economic and social justice reasons. “Targeted interventions are not only more likely to minimize welfare dependency, lower incarceration rates, and increase economic productivity among the disadvantaged, but they also more directly right past wrongs.”

Ruby Takanishi, president of the Foundation for Child Development, disagrees, at least in the case of pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs. She views universal pre-K as the most effective leveler of the academic playing field.

Takanishi first points out that universal interventions are usually an easier sell than targeted interventions. “As long as pre-K programs have only been targeted toward poor children, there has never been full funding for them.” In contrast, Takanishi cites the widespread support of publicly funded universal pre-K programs in some states. “And once universal pre-K programs are in place,” she continues, “public support sustains them.”

Takanishi then underscores the ethical and empirical thorniness of targeting pre-kindergarten: “There is no empirical base telling us which children these programs should target.” She also noted that there is no conclusive evidence that universal pre-K widens the have/have-not gap. “If we wait for all of the evidence to come in,” she says, “we’ll continue to lose generations.” —A.C.S.