



Opening Life Opportunities with **TWO-GENERATION EDUCATION**

By Jessica Tobacman

Two-generation programs have taken the spotlight recently as an innovative way to meet the educational needs of low-income parents and their children. These twin-focus programs simultaneously provide children with high-quality early education and parents with job training. The overall goal is to help families build greater stability in their economic circumstances and family life.



Professor P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale is leading the charge. This School of Education and Social Policy professor of human development and social policy is also a faculty fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University and an inaugural fellow of the Aspen Institute's Ascend program.

Chase-Lansdale has led a major, multi-year initiative to examine the CareerAdvance® two-generation program, which is part of the Community Action Project of Tulsa County, Oklahoma. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families and the Kellogg Foundation believed Chase-Lansdale's plan to be so promising that they funded her research.

CareerAdvance is one of the only programs in the country working with children and their parents at the same time in an effort to improve their future prospects. CareerAdvance supports low-income families not only by educating young children in early childhood programs, but also by preparing parents for high-demand health care jobs. Offering adults financial incentives, career coaches and peer group

meetings are “the best of what we learned” from previous workforce development initiatives and policies, according to Chase-Lansdale, who collaborates with the creator of the program, economist Christopher King, the director of the Ray Marshall Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

Intertwined outcomes

Programs such as CareerAdvance are innovative because they recognize that the success of children and their parents is intertwined. Two-generation programs bring together efforts for both generations, better equipping parents to support their children's learning and allowing the success of children to further motivate parents. More educated parents are more likely to possess the knowledge and skills to help their children take steps forward on the road that leads to graduation, eventually from high school, and then from college.

In a recent paper, “Early Childhood Education Centers and Mothers' Postsecondary Attainment,” published by the *Teachers College Record*, Chase-Lansdale and her co-authors report their results from a noteworthy study. “Participation in high-quality early childhood education can alter low-income mothers' views of what is possible for their children and themselves,” the researchers conclude.

In the twin-focus CareerAdvance program that professor Lindsay Chase-Lansdale studies, children attend high-quality preschool and parents train for health care jobs. Two-generation programs “capitalize on parents' motivation on behalf of their children as well as their sense of belonging to a community,” Chase-Lansdale says.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM OF TULSA AND TULSA WORLD

“Participation in high-quality early childhood education can alter low-income mothers’ views of what is possible for their children and themselves.”

— Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Teachers College Record



The study focuses on three urban early childhood education centers, in Denver, Chicago and Miami, all serving low-income children. These centers meet high-quality criteria, such as maintaining low teacher-to-child ratios and hiring teachers with four-year degrees and early childhood education training.

Chase-Lansdale’s team interviewed mothers whose children attend these early education centers. Parents reported higher motivation for their own education. They also perceived themselves as role models for their children’s educational achievement. In addition, mothers maintained that when their children were learning and thriving at an early childhood education center, they were better able to focus on their own goals. The interviews convinced the researchers that high-quality early childhood education centers offer a promising platform for adult education and training.

The pluses of parent-child learning

Currently, low-income parents receive assistance from a variety of sources including community colleges, welfare, and federal job search and training programs, while their children often learn from early-childhood education programs including Head Start, Early Head Start and PreK-to-Third Grade. Although these efforts have improved access to quality early education for low-income children, they have not offered an approach that helps parents with career education and workforce training.

“We’re arguing that there is an untapped resource in adding parents’ job training and education to early education centers. Such a program can capitalize on parents’ motivation on behalf of their children as well as their sense of belonging to a community. The job training is different from impersonal job training, by building a sense of community, trust and familiarity,” Chase-Lansdale says.

Chase-Lansdale and her colleagues continue to explore the best way to develop two-generation educational interventions. “The idea of bringing generations together requires considerable work on the ground combined with extensive research,” she notes.

“Two-generation programs are very new. We don’t know what their impact will be,” says Chase-Lansdale. “Previously there have been efforts to open up life chances for children and adults, but in separate sectors. Two-generation programs make a lot of sense, and yet they are rare. There is considerable political and research support for early childhood education and its effectiveness in promoting more successful life trajectories. But as families face so many challenges stemming from economic hardship, it is not reasonable for the child to be the only change agent in the family.”

Chase-Lansdale’s research is especially important because of the number of children living in poverty. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 21.9 percent of the nation’s children were living in poverty in 2011. This rate has risen more than 5 percentage points since 2000.

New challenges ahead

In addition to her work at Northwestern University, Chase-Lansdale was recently selected as an inaugural fellow of the Aspen Institute’s Ascend program. The institute is a nonpartisan organization that focuses on policy and education. Its Ascend national fellowship program works to move families out of poverty, and forward on the path toward economic security and educational success.

The Ascend program dovetails with Chase-Lansdale’s main area of research. “It’s very exciting to be part of Ascend, especially since the leaders of the program are quite talented and visionary,” she says. “The idea of the program is to bring together senior leaders from diverse sectors, such as policy, practice, research, business, philanthropy and the media. It’s a very unusual opportunity for innovative collaborations and collective impact.”

In terms of her future research, Chase-Lansdale is now discussing with the Evanston Community Foundation a new pilot program called Education², which would use a two-generation intervention model. “We’re hoping to develop a small model program in Evanston that may draw upon the best practices undergirding CareerAdvance,” she says. “The opportunity to develop an action-research program that draws upon the strengths of Northwestern and Evanston is highly rewarding.”