Recent trends in socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps at kindergarten entry

Sean F. Reardon
Ximena A. Portilla
Stanford Graduate School of Education

The achievement gap between high- and low-income students grew substantially in the last few decades, particularly among those born between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s (Reardon, 2011). While some of the gap may attributable to school-based factors, these income achievement gaps are already substantial (roughly 1.0-1.1 standard deviations) at kindergarten entry (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011).

Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: 2010-2011 Kindergarten Cohort, we examined whether this widening of income achievement gaps has continued in the last decade. We compare the income achievement gap among first-time kindergarteners in 1998 with the gap among first-time kindergarteners in 2010. We find that income achievement gaps narrowed between 1998 and 2010. In math, the gap narrowed by 0.10 standard deviations ($p<.05$); in reading, the gap narrowed by 0.13 standard deviations ($p<.05$). We also find that the black-white and Hispanic-white gaps in math and reading at kindergarten entry declined modestly over the same time period. We conclude the paper with some discussion of possible explanations for these recent trends.