

PROJECT HEAD START

—An Assessment

DURING the past summer over 550,000 children in approximately 2,500 Child Development Centers throughout the country participated in a preschool program formally known as Project Head Start. Project Head Start is one of several Community Action Programs operated under the Office of Economic Opportunity. This project represented the largest program for young children ever sponsored by our government.

Geographically speaking, there were programs as far north as the Arctic Circle; as far south as American Samoa; as far east as the Virgin Islands; as far west as Guam. Children came from rural and urban areas, from Indian reservations and Eskimo villages, from migrant groups and "the Hollows" of West Virginia. In some counties one out of three children who entered kindergarten or first grade this fall were in Head Start programs during the summer.

The project also involved over 100,000 adults—parents, teachers, physicians, psychologists and other professional and volunteer workers. It is noteworthy that while the actual operation of the program could be administered by any local nonprofit organization, over 80 percent of the centers were sponsored by local school systems.

These general facts can give the reader some idea of the scope of the project.

The growth and time element of Head Start are rather remarkable. Implemented in June of 1965, the program was not conceived until November 1964. A Planning Committee was formed during that month composed of outstanding professional leaders, including George Brain, James L. Hymes, Jr. and Jack Neimeyer. A Project Director, Julius B. Richmond, M.D., was named in February.

During the early planning stages the project was referred to as the Kiddie Corps and it was felt that perhaps fifty to one hundred thousand children would be involved in an eight week summer program. By late February the response of local communities was so great (approximately 65 percent of all counties in the U.S. wanted programs) that the projected enrollment was estimated between five and six hundred thousand. While the basic outlines of the program were formulated between November-January, for all practical purposes the actual work of the project (community planning, funding, orientation of teachers) took place over a period of four months. At this writing plans are being considered to: (a) initiate programs to "follow-up" on Head Start children, (b) to begin year-

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around programs wherever possible, and (c) plan for the second Head Start program for the summer of 1966.

Observations

Since research data on the project are not available at this early date, the following statements are based on my observations of the program.

1. *The Concept of the Child Development Center.* One of the most significant aspects of the project is the general idea of a Child Development Center, since Head Start encompasses more than an educational program *per se*.

The Child Development Center is both a concept and a community facility. In concept it represents drawing together all the resources—family, community and professional—which can contribute to the child's total development. It draws heavily on the professional skills of persons in education, health, nutrition, and social services. It recognizes that professional and nonprofessional can make a meaningful contribution. It emphasizes the family as fundamental to the child's total development and the role of the parents in developing policies and participating in the program of the center.

As a community facility the Child Development Center is organized around the classroom and the play area. It provides a program for health services, parent interviews, feeding of children, and meetings of parents and other residents in the community. This concept recognizes that some children have been deprived in many areas—and that the lack of intellectual stimulation is only one of several gaps for the children of the poor. While the concept of nursery school is sound, the concept of a Child Development Center seems more appropriate for the children served by Head Start.

My observations of programs throughout the country reinforce this belief. Many children received early diagnosis of medical problems which were unknown to the parents. In some instances dental diagnosis showed that a "slow learning" problem was in reality a dental problem. In other cases a "discipline problem" turned out to be a medical one.

Most of the children in Head Start were provided with at least one hot meal each day. One teacher told me, "Head Start is providing several of the children in my group with the only substantial meal they receive."

2. *Teachers and Program.* Approximately 40,000 teachers served in Head Start Centers during the summer. Many of these teachers had not had previous experience with children of this age and cultural milieu. As a result there were instances in which third and fourth grade teachers taught miniature versions of these grades and treated the children more like preadolescents than like preschoolers.

Some of the centers were more concerned with seating arrangements and school readiness *per se*. A number of centers concentrated on teaching of reading and numbers and failed to provide a program which would make up for earlier cultural losses in these children.

In some instances the children were highly regimented and programs were lacking in flexibility, thus many golden opportunities were missed for individualized instruction of children. It is unfortunate that more centers did not provide programs which could meet both individual and group needs. I would quickly add that this shortcoming was not due to lack of staff—the teacher to pupil ratio in Head Start was 1 to 13 and the adult to child ratio about 1 to 5. Rather it was usually a lack of imagination on the part of the teacher.

Fortunately, the majority of teachers did capitalize on the small group and did make the transition to preschool types of curriculum. Activities included art, stories, science activities, creative play and visits to various community facilities. These programs were designed to stimulate children's thinking—but, in contrast to situations mentioned earlier, the curriculum was

geared to the interests and abilities appropriate to children of this age.

I feel much of the success of the program was due to the factor of class size. For years educators have asked for small groups and Head Start has demonstrated the value of such class size. The most consistent comment from teachers was in terms of class size and their feeling that substantial gains were possible since they could provide each child with maximum individualized instruction. Whether or not communities will ultimately bear the high cost of small group instruction is another matter. However, this may be the price we must pay for earlier deprivation.

I also believe that the program will ultimately affect the entire educational field in another way. Everywhere I went, school administrators were discussing ways to extend school downward. I feel the most immediate change will be a rise in kindergarten programs in school districts where no program exists; in other districts, there will be a move to extend schooling to three and four year olds.

Perhaps Head Start's biggest contribution has been its effect on the teacher himself. This could be seen in three ways: (a) alerting the teacher to the needs of the poor, (b) seeing the progress which could be made in eight weeks in a small group setting, and (c) a commitment on the part of the teacher to follow through with these children in the fall.

3. *Parents and Community.* Just as the quality of teaching varied, so did the quality of work with parents and with the commitment of the community. In some centers parents participated fully in all aspects of the pro-

gram. Parents served as committee members and, in several instances, as committee chairmen of the center. Parents also served as teacher aides, story tellers, cooks, carpenters and secretaries.

This type of participation is a basic part of the philosophy of the Community Action Program. I am convinced that this philosophy is sound and is justified. By and large parents of culturally deprived children are as concerned with the welfare of their young as any other parents. Perhaps even more so—since these parents know the long term effects of an inadequate education. At one center a Head Start father told me that his teen-age son had more respect for him since he had assumed a role of importance in his community. A number of parents talked of returning to school. Many parents went to the Public Library for the first time to obtain books for themselves and their children.

In some centers, however, there was little or no parent participation. Part of the lack of parent participation was doubtless due to the "crash" aspect of the program, since some communities were unable to mobilize their parents as quickly as others. However, we encountered many instances—often in programs run by the local school system—where no real effort was made to include parents in any way. If this program is to be more than first aid, we must bring parents into the center and

include them in all aspects of the program.

4. *The Child.* Research data and success in school this fall will ultimately provide the information as to how successful the Child Development Center was in providing children with a head start into life.

But for me—as well as many teachers, physicians, social workers and others who worked actively in the program—the day to day, here and now experience which the children received made the program a success.

There were some dramatic instances of children who had never seen themselves in a mirror or children who used a telephone for the first time.

But for nearly all of the children there was a "first" at painting, crayons, child-oriented facilities, or visits to the zoo, supermarket and the fire station. Many situations which middle-class children take for granted, the Head Start child experienced for the first time. Many of these youngsters had never had a book read to them.

Certainly the Child Development Center cannot in eight weeks make up for four years of deprivation. It did not attempt to do so. Rather the program attempted to provide some of the medical, nutritional and educational advantages the children of more affluent parents enjoy. It attempted to give these children a better beginning—or as we at the Office of Economic Opportunity called it—a Head Start.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ordinarily a letter of transmittal is just that—it transmits. However, the letter that accompanied Keith Osborn's article did more than transmit. It gave a sense of the excitement and almost of exaltation felt by many of the persons responsible for initiating and carrying out the pioneering venture for young children that was called Project Head Start. The letter follows:

Saturday
Sept. 11, 1965

Dear Robert:

During Head Start, I was brought to Washington by the Office of Education as Educational Consultant (three days a week) and placed on temporary assignment to the Office for Economic Opportunity with Project Head Start. I went in February so I had the opportunity to see the project grow from infancy.

I must admit the past few months have been the most exciting in my life. As one who taught as a nursery school and kindergarten teacher, it was gratifying to see others become equally interested in the education and welfare of young children.

There were some problems (at times we referred to the project jokingly as "Head Ache" and "Head Shrink") but many more satisfactions—I hope I have presented both fairly. However, I am really prejudiced and perhaps much too close to the Project. It was a huge success. In spite of some poor teaching—there were many more examples of great teaching—and of teachers and administrators who worked long hours on short notice to insure success of the program.

I wish I knew how to tell this part of the story—the many nonprofessionals (the secretaries at OEO and other personnel who worked 12-15 hours every day between February and June—because they wanted these children to have a Head Start in school—the bus driver in West Virginia who took time off from his regular job and went to the Center to have juice and crackers with "his" children because they asked him to. The Head Start Center in Mississippi that met in a church which was burned to the ground by some whites—and they opened the next day in a tent. The farmer who lived near an Indian Reservation and who each morning saddled his horse, forded a river and picked up an Indian child—who would not have attended a Center otherwise. An ADC (Aid-to-Dependent-Children) mother who worked four hours daily in one center—without pay—she paid a baby-sitter to care for her other children—why? Because she wanted these children to get the schooling she never had. The Kentucky principal who worked at two jobs for four months so his county could have Head Start. The Negro principal in Georgia who will probably lose his position in the school system because of his stand in following the "spirit" that Head Start is for *all* children regardless of color. Numerous consultants who, on an hour's notice, dropped everything and flew all over the country to help communities plan for Head Start. I visited one cook (a volunteer) working in a "tenant farm" center—there were no fans and only one small window in the kitchen—the temperature was 97° outside—she was cooking fried chicken and baking rolls for the children. Or even the school superintendent who received funds for 30 migrant children and then returned the funds because the families moved before the Center opened.

I don't know how you tell these stories in an article—it is really unfortunate—since they represent the true flavor of Head Start.

Sincerely,
Keith (Osborn)

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