

Head Start: *Intervention for What?*

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IN 1870 the first publicly supported kindergarten in the United States was opened by the St. Louis, Missouri, school system. This pioneer effort in public preschooling enrolled children as young as two years old, going beyond the boundaries of traditional educational programs to offer a variety of social and physical services to its young charges (Forest, 1927).

Later in the century, the public kindergarten movement became largely an intervention program geared to the special needs of the impoverished children of European immigrants needing socialization and linguistic training before entrance into regular school. However, as kindergartens multiplied and achieved a somewhat secure place in many public school systems, the peripheral social functions were dropped and an entrance age of five became established for kindergarten children. The education of children under five became a luxury available to youngsters from more affluent homes—ironically, those least needing intervention, support, enrichment, and socialization as a springboard for later school success.

It was almost a hundred years before a comprehensive program for preschoolers was to emerge in the form of a federally-sponsored intervention program. During the ensuing century, specialists studying the various aspects of child development became aware of the critical importance of the preschool years, not only in determining the physical and emotional health, but also in

laying the foundation for fulfillment of the child's intellectual potential. From time to time some educational experiments were conducted to meet the special needs of impoverished children, but they were sporadic, one-dimensional and, most important, too late.

In the United States, federal legislation promoting education has traditionally been a response to specific situations or national needs. Just as the educational aid of the mid-fifties was stimulated by the "space race," social legislation dealing with poverty and employment has grown out of social crises of the two preceding decades.

To Break the Poverty Cycle

As concern with the plight of the disadvantaged segment of Americans grew in the sixties, officials planning programs designed to break the crippling cycle of poverty reviewed the potential of early childhood intervention. As a result, Project Head Start was designed as a *comprehensive* program in early intervention. As such, it addressed itself to the multifarious physical, educational, and emotional needs of the child, while also embracing the problems of the total family and the needs and resources of the immediate community.

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Basic to this comprehensive approach was the realization that the poor are homogeneous only in their economic deprivation, that effective programs would have to be tailored to individual sociocultural as well as geographical differences, and that involvement of the immediate community in all phases of program planning and operations was crucial.

A pilot Head Start project focused on total development was launched in the summer of 1965. This first program devoted itself solely to preparing children who were to enter the first regular grade of public school the following September. Centers opened in remote rural areas and suburban poverty pockets as well as inner city ghettos and enrolled some children who had never before seen toys, books, or doctors.

With an initial appropriation of \$96.4 million, Head Start enrolled 561,000 children that first summer. In 1969 about 450,000 children participated in summer programs and 218,000 children in full year programs.

Has Head Start succeeded? Does early intervention work? Although many studies have addressed themselves to this question, no conclusive answer has yet been given.



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Evaluations of early intervention programs have been beset with many problems. Perhaps the main unresolved problem centers around the goal of the program and the purpose of intervention. Since Head Start is not solely an educational program, but rather a comprehensive child development project, evaluation should be geared to the total program, not just to intelligence changes. Unfortunately, however, accurate measurement of total child development and accurate instruments are not yet available. In addition, good experimental designs, including random assignment and comparison grouping, are seldom possible.

Despite the above shortcomings, the bulk of the data available indicates that Project Head Start and other early intervention programs show positive results, largely in children's achievement and general ability level (Datta, 1969; Grotberg, 1969; Gray, 1969; Klaus and Gray, 1968; and Weikart, 1967, 1969). In addition, we have some indications (Grotberg, 1969) that children's attitudes, motivation, and social behavior



Head Start has had great impact on both children and parents.

also change. However, the impact of Head Start as measured by these studies seems to decrease or disappear as the children go through the early grades in elementary school.

A variety of explanations have been given for this "leveling off" phenomenon (Datta, 1969). One of the most commonly stated reasons is that the public school, because of large classes, low expectations, and incongruent philosophy, is at fault. It has been suggested (Spicker, 1971) that in order to maintain the effects of early intervention programs, we must either change the elementary school's educational approach or provide children with preschool experiences that will better prepare them for existing school situations.

Planned Variation

Project Head Start is presently sponsoring an experimental program called Planned Variation which may provide infor-



Available data indicate positive results in early intervention programs.



New studies are needed on the effectiveness of early intervention.

mation on several questions concerned with effectiveness of intervention.

The Planned Variation experiment (Klein, 1971) is an effort to explore the effects of several approaches to preschool education. A similar study is being made by Project Follow Through, a program designed to continue in elementary schools the comprehensive compensatory educational efforts begun in Head Start. Coordinated with Follow Through, Head Start's Planned Variation program is expected to provide information about the following:

1. The effect of various well-defined educational strategies on children in Head Start.
2. The effect on the child of a continuous intervention program following the same educational strategy begun in Head Start and extended in the primary grades.
3. The lasting effect of specific program approaches. Can the rapid rate of development experienced in Head Start be maintained with all approaches?
4. The contribution of an intervention program in preschool in contrast to intervention in the primary grades.
5. The process of curriculum implementation. What does it take to initiate and carry out a new curriculum in a Head Start classroom?

Despite many complex problems and challenges, Project Head Start has made a significant impact. Some changes can be measured quantitatively, others by more sub-

jective means. The impact on community institutions, including the school, was recently documented (Kirschner, 1970). The impact on the lives of individual children and parents has been documented over and over again (*Head Start Newsletter*, newspapers, magazines).

Early childhood education and early intervention are relatively new fields. Debate as to most appropriate methods is not restricted to Head Start but continues among those concerned with enhancing the development of all children. Perhaps the most important impact of Head Start has been a rededication to the needs of preschoolers in all strata of American society as reflected in the rapid growth of preschools and kindergartens throughout the country.

Head Start has been a successful early childhood intervention program. The intent of the project was not just to raise children's IQ—but to raise the quality of their lives before the effects of poverty are reinforced into a self-perpetuating cycle.



Some of the children had never before seen toys, books, or doctors.



Preschoolers throughout American society are served.

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