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The Short-term and Long-term Effects of Head Start Education and No Child Left Behind

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore questions about the effects of Head Start. Among these questions are the following: What is Head Start? What are the short-term and long-term effects of Head Start education? Does Head Start meet the expectations of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)? The methodology used to answer the research questions was a review of the literature. Key words were used to search for appropriate resources, and metacognitive skills were applied in reading and analyzing resources to identify the themes. The literature review results indicate that Head Start has many positive effects. The short-term effects of Head Start include increased cognitive outcomes, while the long-term effects include lower crime rates and increased earnings for Head Start participants. The short term effects help to prepare students to be successful in school, a goal of NCLB. However, no research could be found indicating that Head Start is an evidence-based program or that evidence-based practices are used. Integrating practices from NCLB evidence-based programs, such as Early Reading First and Even Start, may further enhance Head Start program outcomes. Rigorous research on Head Start should be conducted, particularly in the areas of cognitive gains and parental involvement, in order to provide additional information on program outcomes.

Meeting the Expectations of No Child Left Behind:

The Short-term and Long-term Effects of Head Start

What are the short-term and long-term effects of Head Start education on students? This question has been explored by many researchers (Garces, Thomas, & Currie, 2002; McKey, 2003; Zill, Resnick, Kim, O'Donnell, & Sorongon, 2003; Ou & Reynolds, 2004), and it is still being asked. Further, with the requirements of No Child Left Behind, questions arise as to whether or not Head Start meets the expectations of the law. Given the importance of the legislation, discovering the answers to these questions may help educators enhance the quality of services to underprivileged students.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe Head Start and its short-term and long-term effects on students. This problem was addressed by answering a series of questions. These questions are as follow. What is Head Start? What are the short-term and long-term effects of Head Start? What is No Child Left Behind? Does Head Start meet the expectations of No Child Left Behind?

Methodology

To answer the research questions, a literature review (Gay, Mills, Airasian, 2006) was conducted. Literature sources for the review were located using a key word search (Gay, Mills, Airasian). They included articles on the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) Studies and U.S. Department of Education websites concerning No Child Left Behind. As the literature was read, metacognitive strategies were applied for analysis, such as application of organization schemes (Woolfolk, 2007). The results identified themes that answered the research questions.

Literature Review

What Is Head Start?

Head Start is a public preschool program that was designed for disadvantaged children to close the achievement gaps between the disadvantaged child and their more advantaged peers. Head Start aims to improve skills so the disadvantaged child can begin schooling on an equal footing with the more advantaged child. Head Start began in 1965 as part of the “War on Poverty.” It started as a summer school program and then expanded into a half-day preschool with a 90-minute home visit; and, now, it has become a full-year program. Currently, it serves about 800,000 children (Garces et al., 2002). “Head Start is an investment in children that is intended to help them through the rest of their lives.” (Garces et al., ¶ 3).

Head Start may seem like a day care for children; but, in-fact, it is more complex than that. Head Start not only provides a day care for underprivileged children, it also provides education, healthcare, nutrition, and services to parents and the community (Barnett, 1995). The reason why Head Start provides so many more resources than other pre-school programs is because Head Start is designed to help the disadvantaged child. Many of these children live in single-parent homes, and their parent(s) must work many hours. Many Head Start students do not receive nutritious meals in their homes and that is why the program provides this service for them. They do not have healthcare; therefore, the program provides it. The healthcare component of the program provides regular visits to physicians, immunizations, and mental healthcare. These services are designed to help students become ready for school, which helps them to meet the expectations of No Child Left Behind.

Garces and colleagues (2002) noted that in 1980, “Since about 14 percent of the nation’s children were African-American, this implies that about 33 percent of those children participated

in Head Start and that the enrollment rate was around 7 percent among white children.” (Garces et al., ¶ 20). Currently, “Most children in Head Start are minorities, from single-parent families, and most parents are less educated, but substantial numbers of white children, two-parent families, and parents who are high school graduates also participate” (Barnett, 1995, p 29). Having discussed a well established definition of Head Start, short-term effects of Head Start are now explored.

What Are the Short-term Effects of Head Start?

Head Start plays a role in the cognitive development of students who are disadvantaged. According to Woolfolk (2005), cognitive development is the “gradual orderly changes by which mental processes become complex and sophisticated,” and it “refers to changes in thinking” (p. 20). In the 2000 Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) study (Zill et al., 2003), the students’ cognitive outcomes improved as they attended Head Start.

In general, FACES students entered the program with measures of vocabulary, letter recognition, and math that were about a half to a full standard deviation below the national average (Zill et al., 2003). Study results indicated that students’ gains in vocabulary were meaningful. Language minority children also made vocabulary gains. In letter recognition, students knew approximately four letters on entering the program, and left knowing approximately nine. Students made slight gains in mathematics as well. It is important to note that despite these gains, the FACES students still entered kindergarten lagging behind the national average in achievement. Also, a prior FACES study found that “the size of the gains that children made in Head Start were [sic] predictive of their achievement levels by the end of kindergarten” (Zill et al., p. 19). Yet, these findings do indicate gains in cognitive development for students who participate in Head Start. Additional studies with rigorous experimental designs

using control groups may provide further insights into Head Start students' short-term cognitive outcomes.

In addition, the FACES study "examined the quality of Head Start classrooms using several standardized measures of quality that are consistent with the Head Start Program Performance Standards" (McKey, 2003, *Head Start Classroom Quality*, ¶ 1). Instruments and data collection were as follow: the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, scales from the Assessment Profile, the Arnett Scale of Caregiver Behavior, and data on adult-child ratio and class size (McKey). McKey reported that the results of these measures from both 1997 and 2000 FACES studies indicated that "the average Head Start classroom scored in the 'good' range. Indeed over 70 percent of classrooms studied scored in the 'good' or 'excellent' range and very few in the 'minimal' range" (¶ 1). These results show that there is overall positive classroom quality for Head Start, with room for continuous improvement.

What Are the Long-term Effects of Head Start?

The Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (PSID) study (Garces et al., 2002) explored the long-term effects of Head Start. The researchers in the PSID study tracked the lives of individuals who participated in Head Start, interviewing adult household members age 18 through 30 about their participation in Head Start. The questions asked made it feasible to measure the participants' economic and social success when they reached adulthood. The study showed that the white participants in Head Start were associated with an increased probability of completing high school and attending college as well as elevated earnings in their early twenties. African-Americans who participated in Head Start were less likely to have been booked for or charged with a crime. Garces and her colleagues also reported that African-American males who attended Head Start had a higher probability than their siblings to have completed high school.

The Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development (2004) identifies additional long-term effects of preschool programs, stating that they “have been found to be associated with higher IQ scores, better school achievement, lower rates of grade retention and special education placement, and lower rates of delinquency” (Ou & Reynolds, p. 1). In particular, Head Start was found to have positive effects on school completion (Oden, Schweinhart, & Weikhart, 2000 as cited in Ou & Reynolds).

Ou and Reynolds (2004) suggested that “the effects of preschools will be more likely to persist if learning gains are reinforced and supported by family and school experiences after the end of the program participation” (p.13). Ou and Reynolds propose that parental involvement that strengthens home support for learning may enhance the program’s long-term effects. This notion has implications for Head Start, as the program includes a parent component as part of its services. Rigorous research on the parental involvement portion of Head Start may provide further insights into the program. After discussing the short-term and long-term effects of Head Start, No Child Left Behind is explored next.

What Is NCLB and Does Head Start Meet It?

In January 2001, three days after taking on office, President George Bush announced to the public that No Child Left Behind would begin. He stated, “These reforms express my deep belief in our public schools and their mission to build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, Executive Summary, ¶ 1). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is President Bush’s framework for bipartisan education reform. One of the reasons that President Bush decided to sign this act into law was because he believed “too many of our neediest children are being left behind” (U.S. Department of Education, Executive Summary, ¶ 2).

As mentioned previously, Head Start is designed as a program that prepares underprivileged children to be successful in school. Through President Bush's statement, it can be seen that one of intentions of NCLB is the same as that of the Head Start program (i.e., to close the achievement gap between underprivileged students and students of abundant families). Specifically, NCLB was designed so that there would be more accountability for students', teachers', and schools' achievement results, more choices for parents, more freedom for states and communities and to put into action proven education methods (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

To increase accountability, NCLB requires every state to implement statewide standardized tests for every student in grades three through eight. The tests are based on challenging state standards in reading and mathematics, and "all groups of students [must] reach proficiency within twelve years" (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, Increased Accountability, ¶ 1). "Assessment results and state progress objectives must be broken out by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency to insure that no group is left behind." (U.S. Department of Education, Increased Accountability, ¶ 1). These results are reported annually to insure that school districts and schools make adequate yearly progress (AYP). If they do not achieve AYP, improvement is required. Improvement may take the form of corrective action or restructuring, with the goal of assisting the schools to meet state standards. On the other hand, State Academic Achievement Awards are available to those schools that decrease achievement gaps or attain/surpass AYP objectives (U.S. Department of Education).

NCLB was also passed so that parents have more choices. For example, parents of children who attend a Title I school that fails to meet State standards, the district must supply a better school for the children to attend, providing transportation for the students. "In addition to

helping ensure that no child loses the opportunity for a quality education because he or she is trapped in a failing school, the choice and supplemental service requirements provide a substantial incentive for low-performing schools to improve.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, *More Choices for Parents and Students*, ¶ 5). The incentives are multiple. Schools do not want to lose students, as doing so decreases funds available. Also, as mentioned previously, schools failing to make AYP for five years are subject to corrective action or restructuring. NCLB also ensures greater flexibility for states and communities.

Greater flexibility for states and communities means that states, schools, and school districts have the ability to choose how they want to distribute their Federal education funds. The new NCLB provisions allow states and Local Education Agencies “to transfer up to fifty percent of the funding they receive under four major state grant programs to any one of the programs or to Title I” (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, *Greater Flexibility for States, School Districts, and Schools*, ¶ 2). The funds transferred must come from the following federal funding sources: Teacher Quality State Grant, Educational Technology, Innovative Programs, and Safe and Drug-Free Schools (U.S. Department of Education). NCLB also demands that proven education methods are applied in the classroom, known as evidenced-based practices.

The purpose of the NCLB mandate for implementing evidence-based practices is to assure that teaching methods are proven to be successful. Evidence-based practices are shown to be effective through rigorous experimental research. According to Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005), “evidence-based practices refer to those instructional methods and pedagogical approaches that have been verified by numerous research studies” (p. 13). Additionally, programs may be designated as evidence-based if they have rigorous evaluations that demonstrate effectiveness.

There was no documentation found in the literature that Head Start is an evidence-based program. Nor, was there research available that documents the use of evidence-based practices in Head Start. Since the research described in this paper indicates that there is room for continuous improvement both in students' short-term cognitive outcomes and classroom quality (McKey, 2003; Zell et al., 2003), identifying evidence-based programs/practices for integration into Head Start may be one avenue for enhancing the program's performance as well as long-term effects. There are two evidence-based reading programs, Early Reading First and Even Start, whose practices may be integrated into Head Start to achieve the goal of continuous improvement.

Early Reading First is a program intended for the early education of young children who come from low-income families. This program is part of the President Bush's "Good Start, Grow Smart" initiative and "is designed to transform existing early education programs into centers of excellence" that provide high-quality education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a, Program Description, ¶ 1). Like NCLB and Head Start, this program's purpose is to prepare young children to "enter kindergarten with the necessary language, cognitive, and early reading skills" to prevent reading difficulties and ensure school success (U.S. Department of Education, Mission Statement, ¶ 1). A number of children in the U. S. start kindergarten without the required basics that allow them to take full advantage of formal instruction; Early Reading First was created as an attempt to tackle this problem (U.S. Department of Education). Some of the skills that are taught in this program are oral language, such as vocabulary, expressive language, and listening comprehension. Also, phonological awareness, which includes rhyming, blending, and segmenting, is taught along with print awareness and alphabetic knowledge. Since Head Start also works on developing vocabulary and beginning reading skills, integrating practices from Early Reading First may enhance Head Start students' development.

The Even Start Family Literacy Program, like Early Reading First, was designed for the Nation's low-income families. It was originally a part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and was first authorized in 1988. Since then, the program has been reauthorized by the Literacy Involves Families Together Act of 2000 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). Its intentions are to improve the academic achievement of young children and their parents, particularly in the area of reading. "Even Start offers promise for helping to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and low literacy in the nation by combining four core components which make up family literacy: early childhood education, adult literacy (i.e., adult basic and secondary-level education and/or instruction for English language learners), parenting education, and interactive literacy activities between parents and their children." (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b, Purpose, ¶ 2). The program provides family literacy assistance. It targets parents, who have low literacy or limited English proficiency, and their children, beginning from birth through age seven. The program's goals include increasing parent literacy, aiding them to become partners in their children's education, and supporting children to reach their potential as learners. Again, Even Start's goals are similar to those of Head Start. The practices employed in Even Start may be useful for enhancing Head Start, particularly as they relate to strengthening home support for learning.

Conclusion

Head Start is a preschool program designed for disadvantaged children, with the goal of closing the gap between them and their more advantaged peers. Additionally, Head Start not only provides a learning environment, but it also offers healthcare, nutrition, and services for parents and the community. There are multiple advantages to Head Start. The short-term effects indicate increased cognitive outcomes (Zill et al, 2003). The long-term effects of Head Start are

academic, social, and economic. For example, students demonstrated academic achievement by having an increased probability of graduating from high school (Oden et al., 2000 as cited in Ou & Reynold, 2004). African American Head Start students may have fewer reports of involvement with crime (Garces et al., 2004). Also, white students who attend these programs may end up earning more money when they reach adulthood (Garces et al.).

The NCLB Act was established so that no child would be left behind. As described in the literature review in this paper, students of lower socioeconomic status who attend Head Start do enhance their short-term cognitive outcomes and have multiple long-term benefits. In essence, the program does help to address NCLB. However, since there is no literature indicating that Head Start is evidence-based or uses evidence-based practices, utilizing practices from the evidence-based programs such as Early Reading First and Even Start within Head Start may enhance program quality, potentially increasing program benefits.

In addition to integrating evidence-based programs/practices into Head Start for continuing improvement in the program, additional research on Head Start is needed (Barnett, 1995). The best research allows for confident conclusions about the program with criteria of importance including the formation of groups, sample size, and attrition (Barnett). Studies with rigorous experimental designs that explore the short-term and long-term effects of Head Start may lead to its qualification as an evidence-based program. In particular, the results of this literature review indicate that attention should be paid to the areas of cognitive gains and parental support, since these areas support students' academic growth. Research on classroom quality also bears exploration, in order to gain insights for continuous program improvement. Addressing the recommendations identified here may provide information needed to further enhance the quality of services to underprivileged students.

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