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ABSTRACT

This discussion traces the legislative, fiscal, and programmatic history of Project Follow Through and analyzes the many problems and controversies that have surrounded it. It is argued that problems have been largely a result of the attempt to combine research and development (R & D) and social action service programs. Lessons learned as a result of experience with Follow Through suggest that (1) large educational R & D programs should not be abandoned; (2) combining service delivery and R & D programs is very difficult; (3) ambiguities in authorizing legislation should be resolved; (4) a need exists for programmatically useful information on effective compensatory education approaches; (5) program effectiveness is only slightly related to cost, managerial properties primarily account for program effectiveness, structured programs are more effective with disadvantaged children than unstructured programs, and new R & D activities should stress complete projects and models; and (6) for the purpose of assessing program effectiveness, randomized or quasi-experimental designs are preferred, programs assessed should be clearly different, replications of all models studied should be made in sufficient number, and program implementation should be considered an essential factor. (RH)

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*Paper prepared for NIE  
Follow Through Planning*

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM FOLLOW THROUGH? Implications for Future R & D Programs

Although the historical background of Follow Through is well-known to those who have followed the program and are today involved in planning its future, it is nevertheless useful to trace the highlights of this background so that we are all on common ground, and any newcomers to this remarkable social program arena will have a basis for understanding its fascinating and distressing characteristics.

Follow Through was one of several education programs born out of the War on Poverty during the middle and late 60s. Though it is not widely known, all of the OEO programs came out of a larger plan which attempted to lay out the causes and cures of poverty in American society on a systematic basis (4). The OEO planners reasoned that poverty should be attacked on four major fronts:

- Macro economic policy to maintain high employment;
- A negative income tax program to provide income for those who because of age, infirmity, or other basic reasons could not find employment;
- Manpower training programs for adolescents and adults whose lack of skills and credentials prevented them from entering the labor market or remaining there, and;

- Compensatory education programs for the purpose of preventing individuals from deprived backgrounds from reaching adulthood without the basic educational and coping skills necessary for employment.

Macro economic policy was, of course, subject to many influences and requirements, and the fiscal and political forces never congealed to support full negative income tax legislation. (A major experiment in this area was mounted, however.) So, apart from the relabeling of some existing programs, the new thrusts in the War on Poverty consisted of a variety of new programs in the manpower training and compensatory education areas, as well as in health and community action.

The centerpiece of the compensatory education initiative was Head Start. At the time this program was conceived and put together, psychologists, educators, and others were facing up for the first time to the already known and well documented facts that:

- Disadvantaged children arrived at the first grade with educational deficits which were clearly measurable at that time.
- The differences in intellectual proficiency and basic skills between these disadvantaged children and their middle class peers widened rather than narrowed as the children proceeded through school.
- By the time children reached 7th or 8th grade, the gap seemed irremediably wide, and resulted in disadvantaged

children continually experiencing the psychologically devastating experience of failure.

- Such children were much more likely to drop out of school and drift into a life of drugs, unemployment, crime, and welfare.
- From all this it could be confidently predicted that the same pattern of disadvantage and failure would reproduce itself in the next generation.

Thus, it was reasoned that if a program like Head Start could be effective, it could narrow or perhaps even close this gap in the preschool years, and thereby set the remediated children on an altogether different life course.

Even the most optimistic protagonists of the Head Start strategy, while they over estimated what was known about compensatory education and how much change such programs could bring about, knew that once children left the more enriched environment of the Head Start programs and returned to their disadvantaged homes, any benefits which might have been achieved would either level off or recede. It was at this point in the reasoning and the programmatic history that the idea of a Follow Through program was conceived to provide continuing reinforcement and enrichment for the Head Start graduates during the early elementary grades.

Like Head Start, Follow Through was not proposed as a small scale R&D or pilot demonstration program. The intention was to begin at an

appreciable level of program activity — more than \$100 million — and expand in subsequent years to cover the full target population. At that time, Head Start and Follow Through were not free standing, separately authorized programs with their own separate appropriations. They were part of the larger Community Action Program and appropriation within OEO. When the Congress acted on the OEO budget in 1968, it did not specifically say no to the proposal for Follow Through but it provided only a modest addition to the total Community Action Program budget — far less than the amount requested to inaugurate the Follow Through program. OEO had the task of distributing the budget, and understandably chose not to cut other programs in order to allow the new Follow Through program to begin at its fully requested level. The result was that its initial appropriation was \$15 million.

When this decision was made the original administrators of Follow Through made a wise, indeed, brilliant decision. They said, in effect, since we do not have enough money to launch a service program at any meaningful level, i. e. , one that could treat any significant portion of the target population, then let us convert Follow Through to an R&D program and use it to find out what approaches are effective in the field of compensatory education.

Unfortunately, the full implications of this decision and the fundamental differences between R&D programs on the one hand and ideologically based social action programs on the other were not understood, and the subsequent

history of Follow Through has largely been an acrimonious and unresolved series of arguments among the major stakeholders in the program — program administrators, planners and evaluators, the Congress, and the program constituents — over what the program should be and how it should operate.

Vigorous efforts on the part of the program managers, support from their constituents, and sympathetic reception in the Congress resulted in raising the original budget level to a high of \$59 million — far more than is needed for the most elaborate R&D program, but far less than would be needed to support a service program at any meaningful level.

The R&D thrust of the program took the form of attempting to mount a planned variation experiment in which 17 different model programs would be studied and compared. Unfortunately, this effort was poorly conceived and executed. The 17 models were not systematically developed or selected, with the result that many were only marginally different from one another. Also, in many cases the model existed as little more than a few sketchy ideas and took years to bring to the point where implementation could begin. In many cases implementation of the model in its various sites was neither monitored nor enforced, with the result that the design needed to study the operations and outcomes of the different models, namely their full replication in several different sites, was achieved only for a few of the models.

It is disappointing, though no one should have been surprised, that after

the expenditure of several hundred million dollars on program operations, and an embarrassingly large amount (in excess of \$50 million) on a major longitudinal evaluation, the principal finding was that only one or two of the models could be said to be producing appreciable attitudinal and achievement gains in the Follow Through children (1, 2). (However, reflecting the other side of the inter-site variation coin, a substantial number of individual Follow Through projects have presented solid evidence of effectiveness and have been approved for dissemination by ED's Joint Dissemination Review Panel (3). See below.)

From 1975 through 1978, successive administrations attempted to scale back or phase out the Follow Through program, arguing that its service activities were largely redundant with Title I and should be folded into that program, and that the planned variation experiment, such as it was, had run its course. In every case, Congress which has been quite supportive of Follow Through, rejected the administration's proposals to in any way reduce the program. (The budget has been recently reduced to \$44 million.) Congress' defense of the program has been based not only on its popularity and its appeal as an effort to help poor kids, but also on strong opposition to what it felt was the Nixon administration's unjustified efforts to dismantle the anti-poverty programs.

#### The Lessons of the Follow Through Experience

The lessons from the Follow Through experience are painful, but

clearly we are obliged to learn from it. There is a great deal to be learned from the Follow Through experience, both at the level of how large government R&D programs should and should not be run, as well as at the more micro level of how NIE should spend the limited Follow Through R&D funds it is responsible for managing.

1. Despite the manifold problems with Follow Through, we should not conclude that large educational R&D programs, as a principal means of knowledge development and program improvement, should be abandoned. They can be made to work if we do not senselessly and mechanically repeat the programmatic, methodical, and political errors of the past.
2. A principal lesson to be learned from the Follow Through experience is the enormous difficulty — some would say the clear impossibility — of trying to combine service delivery and R&D programs. They are very different enterprises and in some ways are fundamentally incompatible. Social programs thrive on ideological intensity, flamboyant public relations, unshakeable commitments to programmatic objectives and effectiveness, and skillful political manipulation. The purpose of R&D programs, on the other hand, is not to deliver services per se but to discover the most effective ways of doing that. Thus, their staffs must be technical rather than political or programmatic, and their attitudes skeptical and dispassionate



rather than committed or proselyting. The most fundamental difference between the two is that program managers and their supporters assume as established what researchers and evaluators are trying to determine. This means that in any future efforts to mount large scale experimental R&D programs, it is absolutely essential that the fundamental purpose of such programs be established at the outset, and that all the necessary steps are taken to ensure that the right kind of staff, procedures, objectives, outcome measures, limitations on time and funding horizons, etc., are set forth and agreed upon.

More than once I recall Congressmen asking staff members from the Follow Through program at Congressional hearings such questions as, "How many children are you now serving?" The answer which should have been given but never was is, "Mr. Chairman, the purpose of the Follow Through program is not to serve any particular number of children but to develop and assess effective ways for doing that." Follow Through has been viewed by its own program staff, by most people in Congress, and by most of its constituents as mainly a service program, and it has been examined and assessed on service, not R&D criteria.

In a situation where the basic objectives of a program are either unclear or at issue, it is unfair to ask program oriented

administrators to make decisions and allocate resources for R&D purposes when they know they are going to be assessed by service program standards. Similarly, the research and evaluation members of the program cannot expect to have the program structured or operated in a way that will facilitate knowledge development. Therefore, the R&D part of the program will continually face obstacles that will more than likely result in failure for its objectives.

3. Since authorizing legislation for social programs is usually a compromise hammered out in an adversarial political context, more likely than not it will be fundamentally ambiguous on the program's service vs R&D orientation.

It is therefore incumbent upon the Executive Branch agencies to aggressively and tenaciously pursue the matter of resolving these ambiguities, unpleasant though that task may be. The specific lesson to be extracted here is that Executive Branch agencies must work with the Congress, must present a program plan which resolves ambiguities in the legislation, and must secure Congress' agreement or acquiescence to proceeding along a clear and specific line of action.

4. There is still a great need for programmatically useful information on effective compensatory education approaches.

Despite the dissatisfaction and debate over the Westinghouse evaluation of Head Start (5), no satisfactory evaluation of the effectiveness of that program has subsequently been done, with the result that we do not know with any confidence whether the program as a whole is effective, or whether any of its sub-elements or components are achieving their objectives. As noted above, we have some useful knowledge coming out of the evaluation of Follow Through, but it is largely to the effect that one or two approaches seem to work decently well and the rest either haven't been implemented, or don't work, or both. The recent evaluations of Title I (2) are beginning to show some evidence of marginal effectiveness in that program, but both the magnitude and extent of gains are so small that at its current level of effectiveness the program can make only limited headway toward ameliorating the educational deficits of disadvantaged children. Thus, the decision to make another effort to organize and more effectively employ the Follow Through R&D monies — as the Department of Education, the Follow Through program, and NIE are now doing — is responsible and makes good sense.

5. Despite all the justified lament over the failure in the past decade to develop a comprehensive body of knowledge about effective approaches to compensatory education — much less

to solve the problem itself — some important lessons have emerged from our research, evaluation, and programmatic experience with the several major compensatory education programs. Among them are the following:

- a. In the increasingly critical financial circumstances being faced by most schools, and with the school bond, Proposition 13, and inflation forces of the future looking even grimmer, schools are simply not going to be in the market for compensatory education programs which require them to add the order of \$800 on top of their present escalating per pupil expenses. Thus, even if the Follow Through models were effective, they have no place to go. What is more important is that there is accumulating evidence that they need not be that costly to be effective. There is a growing body of evidence that indicates that program effectiveness is related very little to cost. One of the most compelling but not widely known elements in this accumulating body of evidence is the collection of programs (3) approved by the Department of Education's Joint Dissemination Review Panel (JDRP). These programs are examined rigorously for evidence of effectiveness before being approved for dissemination by ED programs. The

rate of approval is about 60% of submissions, and informal analysis of the compensatory education programs in this collection indicated they range in per pupil cost all the way from .50 to over \$2,000. Most of them are far below the \$800 Follow Through figure, and there seems to be little relationship between their effectiveness and their cost. What this means specifically for the NIE R&D program is that it should ensure that whatever models are developed are within the fiscal reach of public schools; otherwise, they will never be adopted or implemented. But more importantly, the evidence suggests that making such a limitation will not rule out quality or effectiveness.

- b. An important substantive lesson strongly suggested by the evaluation evidence from Follow Through, Title I, and the many programs which have come before the JDRP is that managerial rather than content properties of a program primarily account for its effectiveness. Specifically, what this means is that programs which have such things as well structured training programs for the teachers, objective selection mechanisms for the students, quantitative pre-post tests and measurements of progress throughout the program, structured feedback to students on their progress, well planned and

monitored lesson plans, etc., etc., seem to be more successful than programs which lack these properties, regardless of the content or curriculum they employ. Quite appropriately, the NIE planning document takes note of this emerging finding and recommends that it be followed up and built upon.

- c. As a variation of this point, findings from the Follow Through and Title I evaluations and others, indicate that structured as opposed to loose, open, or self-guiding programs are more effective for disadvantaged kids, especially in the early years.
- d. To be operationally useful to classroom educators, the new R&D activities should stress complete projects and models rather than research on individual educational variables. In any formulation of a total educational research program, there should of course be recognition of the need for research on the individual and interactive effects of all the major variables impinging on the learning situation. But the findings that emerge from these kinds of basic knowledge investigations are not what school administrators and teachers can apply in their classrooms. What they need is a clear set of elements and components that fit together into an

educational program or model that: 1) has been found to be effective when utilized in a broad array of similar classroom settings; and 2) they can with appropriate modifications put to work in their own classrooms with confidence that it will produce similar achievement outcomes. Contrary to the concerns of some, there is no need for this approach to be a procrustean mode of program improvement.

6. Moving from substance to matters of design, if what I have said above about the continuing need for information about effective compensatory programs and the greater programmatic utility of project or model as opposed to individual variable kinds of knowledge is true, then it follows that at some point it makes sense to mount another fairly ambitious planned variation type of study which would assess the effectiveness of alternative models and approaches to early childhood compensatory education. If this is ever done — and there are many obstacles in the path to doing it — the Follow Through experience has taught us several clear lessons:
  - a. Randomized or quasi experimental designs remain the best way to assess the effectiveness of compensatory education programs, or for that matter anything else. Because of the time, cost, implementation difficulties,

and outcome ambiguities which have plagued many large quasi-experimental evaluations, some researchers have been arguing that this basic methodology should be abandoned in favor of smaller, more limited, and more informal approaches. This would be a mistake. The essence of program evaluation is the attribution of cause — the establishment that there has been a significant change in the program population and that this change can be confidently attributed to the program and not some other cause or experience. The only satisfactory way we have of making such a determination is through experimental design type evaluations. The appropriate response to the difficulties they encounter is not to retreat to a vastly more ambiguous and therefore more debatable kind of method, but to renew our efforts to correct the difficulties.

- b. One of the major difficulties in the Follow Through evaluation, as I noted above, was the failure at the outset to establish clearly distinguishable models. Program managers yielded to a variety of offers and pressures and settled on an overly large number of models many of which were only marginally distinguishable from one another. In future NIE assessments



of this kind, care should be taken to select or develop a small number of clearly different approaches to compensatory education, approaches that are different from one another in theoretical base, in types of education experiences offered, etc. It is only through a controlled examination of the outcomes of such clearly distinguishable approaches that we can really learn what works for whom in compensatory education.

- c. The Follow Through experience has also made clear the crucial importance of instituting a sufficient number of replications of all the models under study. It is sophomoric to have to lecture ourselves on such obvious considerations as: educational communities and contexts vary, and therefore what may be successful in one place may not be generalizable; some sites will experience a variety of local difficulties and will fall out of the study entirely; one needs some reasonable number of cases to analyze data statistically; etc. But the absence of sufficient replications of the different models in the Follow Through evaluation was one of the crippling shortcomings in that R&D effort.
- d. The Follow Through experience also makes clear how essential and uncertain the matter of implementation is.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM FOLLOW THROUGH?

Implications for Future R & D Programs

SUMMARY

This paper traces the legislative, fiscal, and programmatic history of the Follow Through program and analyzes the many problems and controversies that have surrounded it. In large part, these problems have resulted from its attempt to pursue the conflicting goals of being an R&D program and a social action service program.

Several lessons are extracted from the Follow Through experience:

1. Large scale educational R&D programs should not be abandoned. By learning from the past, their substantial problems can be overcome and much can be learned from them.
2. Combining social action and R&D programs is extraordinarily difficult, perhaps impossible. Their goals, procedures, outcome measures, and required types of staff are often fundamentally incompatible.
3. Authorizing legislation is usually ambiguous on the key issue of whether the primary thrust of a program should be to deliver services or, through research, to develop improved means of doing that. To avoid the problems encountered by Follow Through and other similar programs, Executive Branch

Again, the Follow Through evaluation was plagued not only by insufficient replications of the various models but also by the fact that the models were poorly and variably installed across their various sites, with the result that instead of having seven replications of model A, we had two replications of model A and five other substantially different programs, or in some cases no program at all.

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It has not been my purpose in assembling these lessons from the Follow Through experience to assign blame. It is easy in retrospect to see how things should have been done differently, but vastly more difficult to have that wisdom at the time and be able to implement it.

But we can and must learn from these kinds of experiences. And if we learn what we should from Follow Through, it will greatly enhance our ability to rationally develop effective compensatory education programs, instead of waiting until they occasionally appear by chance.

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agencies should work closely with the Congress to resolve these ambiguities.

4. There is still a great need for information on effective approaches to compensatory education. Therefore, NIE's current effort to organize and more effectively employ the Follow Through R&D monies makes good sense.
5. Despite all its problems, the Follow Through experience has provided us with a number of important lessons. Among them are the following:
  - a. The current level of per pupil expenditures in the Follow Through program — \$800 — is too high to secure interest or adoption by financially hard pressed school districts. Lower cost programs should be sought, and there is an accumulating body of evidence which indicates that this will not be impossible to do, since effectiveness is not highly related to cost.
  - b. Managerial rather than curricular content properties of compensatory education programs seem to be the major determiners of their effectiveness.
  - c. Structured as opposed to loose or self guiding compensatory education programs appear to be more effective for disadvantaged kids, especially in the early years.

- d. The development of complete educational projects or models is likely to be more useful to classroom educators than general scientific knowledge on the interrelationships of educational variables.
6. At some propitious time in the future, consideration should be given to mounting another ambitious, planned variation type of study. If this is done, the Follow Through experience provides us with a number of important lessons:
    - a. Randomized or quasi experimental designs remain the best way to assess the effectiveness of compensatory education programs.
    - b. The models in any such experiment must be developed or selected in a way to ensure that they are clearly distinguishable from one another.
    - c. There must be an adequate number of replications of each model.
    - d. Steps must be taken to ensure that the models are in fact implemented across their various sites.