

## **An overview of Head Start Program studies**

Jeanne Morris Hines  
Grand Canyon University

### **Abstract**

Johnson's "War on Poverty" administrative team campaigned for committee members to join the War on Poverty efforts to create and develop programs for children born into poverty (Zigler, 2003). Poverty based programs, such as the Head Start program, continue to put into place proactive measures to increase preschooler's cognitive development, and social skills. Research has suggested if a preschooler who qualifies for the Head Start program but does not attend early interventions has an 80% chance of dropping out of school, an increased tendency for teenage pregnancy, typically lacks foundational skills in reading and math, commonly fails state and federal assessments, and lacks continued parental involvement (Vanderstaay, 2006). The following overview discusses the historical aspects of the Head Start Program, Federal Poverty Guidelines, early childhood studies, High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, the Abecedarian Study and the advantages/disadvantages of the Head Start Program.

Keywords: Head Start Program, preschoolers, Family-Centered Preschool Model, Abecedarian Study, and War on Poverty.

Copyright statement: Authors retain the copyright to the manuscripts published in AABRI journals. Please see the AABRI Copyright Policy at <http://www.aabri.com/copyright.html>

## **Introduction**

The Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) was created in 1964 in response to the late President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty." This act addressed inequities and lack of educational opportunities and helped economically disadvantage preschoolers. The EOA developed a number of antipoverty initiatives in response to the needs of coal miners in the Appalachian Mountains (Muncy, 2009). As a result of the War on Poverty initiatives, preschoolers benefitted throughout the United States through the Head Start Programs Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Title I, and other follow through programs created by the EOA (Lee, 1998).

### ***Johnson's War on Poverty***

Johnson's War on Poverty administrative team campaigned for committee members to join the War on Poverty efforts to create and develop programs for children born into poverty (Zigler, 2003). Sargent Shriver, President Johnson's chief strategist in the antipoverty war, was given the task of finding the committee members for the Planning Committee on the War on Poverty. Shriver had conducted studies of child development and mental retardation at the University of Texas in Austin (Zigler et al., 2003). Previous research conducted by Shriver along with Susan Gray consisted of a longitudinal study called the Early Training Project, which in the 60's was a preschooler's enrichment program in Murfreesboro, Tennessee (Vanderstaay, 2006).

During this particular time, Shriver continued to play a key role in Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty by founding the Peace Corps, Head Start Program, Neighborhood Health Services, and Legal Services for the poor. At one of his lectures, Shriver requested Robert Cooke to join the antipoverty panel to create programs geared toward reducing poverty across the country. According to Cooke, children living in poverty experienced an inordinate amount of failure that eroded their ability to learn even before they started school. Cooke found throughout his studies related to mental retardation that poor children would have a better chance of succeeding if opportunities were provided for them to be school-ready (Zigler et al., 2003).

Through the EOC an initiative, Project Head Start was established in 1965 as an eight-week summer program, was started in the basements of churches and in public schools throughout the United States. During its first implementation, Project Head Start enrolled over 561, 000 children. At this particular time, the federal government provided funding to local entities who programs goals were to address poverty, educational attainment, and low-income citizens. The hidden agenda was to have local communities to be the foundational support for the community based initiatives. The grantee would provide 20% of the funding, while the federal government provided 80% of the funding. Over a two-year period, the project evolved into a comprehensive program to help preschoolers born into poverty (Gallagher, 2000).

### **Head Start Program**

The Head Start Program (H.S. Program) is the nation's largest early intervention and prevention program for at-risk low-income preschoolers in the United States (Bratton, Ceballos, Sheely-Moore, Meany-Walen, Pronchenko, & Jones, 2012). Head Start is a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and participants in the program are provided

comprehensive services. Comprehensive services provided by the Head Start Program include education, social, health, and nutrition interventions for all preschoolers (Olson & Olson, 1997). Although the Head Start Program is a two-year program, 80% of preschoolers only attend the program for one year and with the largest age group being 4-year-olds (Ripple, Walter, Chanana, & Zigler, 1999).

Each Head Start Program is required to have a set number of preschoolers enrolled through the school year. Based on the set number of preschoolers enrolled the Head Start Program is required to have a certain number of Head Start Program slots available for those preschoolers who live above the poverty line and receive special education services (Ripple et al., 1999). In 2002, there were 18.5 million children who had been enrolled in the Head Start nationwide since 1965 (Caputo, 2004). Those enrolled in the Head Start Program then consisted of 54% 4 year-olds and 35% 3 year olds. Demographics related to race indicated consisted of 29.9% Caucasians, 33.8% Blacks, and 29.7% Hispanics. During 2002, the average cost of providing Head Start services for one preschooler was \$6, 633, totaling \$6.2 billion yearly (Caputo et al., 2004). Another requirement of the Head Start program is parental involvement either by serving on policy councils or volunteering in the classroom (Ripple et al., 1999). Preschoolers enrolled in the Head Start Program can attend either a half-day or a full-day (Olson et al., 1997).

In addition to full-day services, the Head Start Program also provides each child with comprehensive services, including at least one hot meal per program day. Other services provided by the Head Start Program include physical health, mental health, dental referrals, and home visits. Approximately three-fourths or 76% of the children in the United States are enrolled in some form of center-based childcare or preschool before entering kindergarten (Green, Malsch, Kothari, Bussee, & Brennan, 2012).

### ***Federal Poverty Guidelines***

According to Rikoon, McDermott, & Fantuzzo (2012), in a review of the National Longitudinal Survey (2006), a family with an annual salary of \$ 22, 350.00 with four family members meets the federal government's criteria of living in poverty. The study revealed that 12.3% of the United States population or 36 million people lived in poverty (Rikoon et al., 2012, p. 272-295). In 2009, children under the age of 6 years old accounted for 20.7% of people living under the poverty line in the United States. In comparison to children born to middle-class or wealthy parents, children born into poverty are 29% more likely to repeat a grade level, 12% more likely to be suspended from school, and 21% more likely to drop out of school (Pressman, 2011, p. 323-332.).

Federal Public Law 105-117 Part C & H provides protection for young children who are born into poverty. As part of this law, early intervention services shall be provided to preschoolers in different contexts in order to develop their cognitive abilities and graduation rates (Goodway & Branta, 2003). The official measure of childhood poverty is known as an "absolute measure". This measure is based on the following criteria: (1) the cost of a subsistence food budget and (2) the proportion of the total budgets that families spent on food (Aber, Hammond, & Thompson, 2010). Studies related to absolute measure will indicate that childhood poverty limits a child's cognitive abilities because of the lack of environmental influences and educational opportunities that stimulate learning (Aber et al., 2010). Research suggests there are additional environmental influences that should be considered such as parental involvement and

education, developing reading abilities, and providing the preschooler with a stimulating environment to increase cognitive development (Guo, 1998).

### **Poverty-based Intervention Studies**

#### ***Early Childhood Research Institute for Measuring Growth and Development Study***

Through funds provided by the Office of Special Education Programs, the Early Childhood Research Institute for Measuring Growth and Development (ECRI-MGD) was developed as a single system to measure outcomes and indicator related to growth and development (Greenwood, Carta, & McConnell, 2011). Through the Early Childhood Research Institute for Measuring Growth and Development, the General Outcome Measurement (GOM) approach was developed. The purpose of the General Outcome Measurement is to provide a form of measurement that supports the use of curriculum and intervention approaches for all children. GOM approach provides information regarding the preschoolers 'progress over-time and determines whether or not intervention is needed within the classroom (Greenwood et al., 2011).

The IGDIs is appropriate for young children within three developmental stages: (1) Infant/toddlers ( 6 to 36 months), (2) Part C, Early Head Start (EHS) and Part B – Pre – K and Head Start Program, and (3) early elementary students (Grades K-3). An example of IGDIs for preschoolers is Picture Naming IGDI, which is a measure of the preschooler's ability to produce words correctly in response to presentation of a series of individual 5 X7 color photo cards as expressive vocabulary is measured. All photos represent objects typically in the preschoolers' environment. Data collected will determine whether or not interventions are needed (Greenwood et al., 2011).

#### ***Early Childhood Intervention Studies***

On the other hand, the Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) states a child with special needs should be assessed to determine instructional plans to support his Individual Educational Plans (IEPs). ECI requirements are based on the passage Education of Handicapped Act P.L. 94 – 142 which mandated a free and appropriate public education for all children with disabilities. Years later the Public Law 94-142 was expanded to include infants through 3 years old (P.L. 94 – 457) (Bagnato, McLean, Macy, & Neisworth, 2011). In a recent study conducted in Wisconsin with second grade and fifth grade, teachers found many children will need additional help in the fundamentals of word identification, reading, decoding, written expression and math. The individual educational plan for children diagnosed as having a learning disability will need to address these specific reading deficiencies. A well-developed IEP will contain goals and objectives that not only address the child's weakness but their strengths as well. Also, the IEP needs to be monitored and modified according to the child's academic progress (Catone & Brady, 2005).

#### ***High/Scope Perry Preschool Study***

The High/Scope Preschool Study, instituted in 1962, is considered a pioneering longitudinal study of preschoolers born into poverty (Justice, Mashburn, Pence, & Wiggins,

2008). It is considered to be one of the first studies that examined the effects of preschoolers' education and poverty relationship to education. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study still provides valuable information concerning educational achievements of preschoolers taught using the active learning model which is similar to the Head Start Program's Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework (Justice et al., 2008). The Active Learning Model is defined as the preschoolers' ability to play an active role in learning tasks which embody generic skills and attitude development to develop the acquisition of knowledge. As knowledge is formulated the preschoolers' acquires skills needed to become a life-long learner through developing for example basic reading skills or writing abilities (Kern, 2002). The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study is based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Piaget's theory of cognitive development contends there are stages of development placed fostered cognitive and social-emotional development (Heydon and Wang, 2006).

The methodology of the High/Scope Preschool Study examined 124 African-Americans born into poverty that had a high risk of school failure. Participants in the study were selected based on the following: (1) low socioeconomic status and (2) Low IQ scores ranged from 70% to 85% (Justice et al., 2008). All of the participants were randomly assigned into groups by age, 3 through 4 year-olds. The entire population was examined at different age levels: 11, 14, 15, 19, 27 and 39 – 41 years old. Findings suggested preschoolers identified as having good health increased the preschooler's ability to perform better in school (Crosnoe, 2006). Results of this study indicated that poverty-born preschoolers improved their educational performances as a result of the High/Scope Preschool Study active learning model, therefore, contributing to a society through economic developments such as employment or buying a home or reducing the crime rate (Justice et al., 2008).

### *The Abecedarian Study*

The Abecedarian Study (ABC) Study involved 111 infants of whom 50% lived below the federal poverty line, 80% had low IQ's, and 75% had single parents (Ramsey & Ramsey, 2004). Beginning in 1972 and ending in 1977, the ABC Study consisted of four cohorts whom participants were randomly assigned to control and treatment groups at an average age of 4.4 months (Harris, 2009). Participants in the study were placed in two groups: (1) Control Group and (2) Treatment Group. The Control Group was given a food supply which consisted of formula, social services and free or reduced medical care throughout the first 5 years of life. The treatment group was enrolled in the early childhood centers by the age of 6 months, then into a full-day preschool program (Ramey et al., 2004).

Both groups were administered a development IQ assessment that showed continued growth cognitive of the preschoolers during their first 9 months of life. Bayley Developmental Quotient measures aspects of preschoolers' growth and development. By 18 months the control group had declined, performing lower than the mean of the Bayley Developmental Quotient. As the treatment group aged through its preschool years, their cognitive abilities increased by 14 points from their original IQ score. The preschooler's results indicated aspects of the children's growth and development increased overtime cognitively as a result of enrollment in preschool educational programs (Ramey et al., 2004).

## **Criticisms of the Head Start Program**

### ***Advantages of the HS Program***

Considered to be at the core of the “War on Poverty,” the H.S. Program is one of the last antipoverty programs still in existence in the United States (Henry, Gordon, & Rickman, 2006). Currently, the program bypasses the states and directly funds independent local agencies or grantees, which operate comprehensive school readiness and social support programs targeted primarily to 3 and 4 year olds from economically disadvantaged homes and their families (Henry et al., 2006). The Head Start Program identification of preschoolers with disabilities allows early interventions to take place. In 1992, 14% of the Head Start preschoolers were identified as need special education services related to a disability and about 68% of those preschoolers required speech/language therapy (Reddden, Ramey, Ramey, Forness, & Brezausek, 2003).

### ***Head Start Longitudinal Study***

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) conducted a longitudinal study called “Head Start Longitudinal Study” (HSLs). The study addressed the comparative gains made by disadvantaged children in three program variations: (a) students in the Head Start Program, (b) preschoolers who attended non-preschool programs, and (c) preschoolers’ who attended another preschool program other than the Head Start Program (Lee, Brooks-Gunn, & Schnur, 1988). The HSLs study concentrated on cognitive changes in children exposed to the three programs variations after one school years’ experience. Participants in the study were recruited from the first 1971 HSLs conducted by ETS. The subject sample size consisted of 646 African-American children. The data indicated 51% of the children had received pedagogical instruction through the Head Start program. On the other hand, 32% of the children had not received any instruction through the Head Start program. Still 17% of the children had received pedagogical instruction through other preschool programs (Lee et al., 1990).

Outcomes measures were based on data received by administering the following assessments: (1) Cooperative Primary Test, (2) Children’s Embedded Figures Test, (3) Raven’s Colored Progressive Matrices, (4) California Pre-school Competency Scale, and (5) the Schaefer Classroom Based Inventory (Lee et al., 1990). The Cooperative Primary Test (CPT) is for grades 1.5 to 2.5. It assesses verbal abilities through listening, word analyses and reading (alpha reliability .80). Children’s Embedded can be administered to children 5-10 years old. CE accesses a child’s use of differentiation and perceptual functioning. Third, the Raven’s Color Progressive Matrices Test measures perceptual reasoning task (Lee et al., 1990). Results of the HSLs Study indicated Head Start preschool scored significantly higher on the California Preschool Competency Test (Lee et al., 1990). In the statistical analysis, girls scored higher on the social competence for the California Competency Test, than boys who scores increased on the California Preschool Competency (CPC) (Lee et al., 1990).

### ***Family-Centered Preschool Model***

Another advantage of attending the Head Start Program starts with its use of the Family-Centered Preschool Model. The Family-Centered Preschool Model (FC-Preschool Model) is the foundation of the delivery of early intervention services to infants/toddlers and their families (Kaczmarek, Goldstein, Florey, Carter, Cannon, 2004). Head Start Programs which use family-centered practice help families in making decisions about their preschooler by providing complete and unbiased information, support families emotionally, provide access to community agencies and respect of cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in the learning process. If the preschooler is in special education, the FC-Preschool Model will provide the family with support, known as family consultants (FCs). The role of the FCs is to provide any additional support the disabled preschooler may need during his Head Start Program experience (Kaczmarek et al. 2004).

### ***Disadvantages of the H. S. Program***

Although the H. S. Program continues to provide parents and preschoolers the opportunity to acquire early academic opportunities, proponents suggest there are still disadvantages of the Head Start Program. Since the 1994 reauthorization of Head Start expenditures have doubled to \$6.7 billion in 2003. While the number of children receiving these services continues to rise (Henry et al., 2006).

### ***National Reporting System (NRS)***

The National Reporting System (NRS) is administered to all 4 and 5 year olds enrolled in the Head Start Program twice a year by the classroom teacher (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2004). Although it has no psychometric practice, the NRS test as described by the Head Start Bureau is to: (1) to enhance local aggregation of child outcome data and local program self-assessment efforts, (2) to enable the Head Start Bureau and Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Regional Offices to plan training and technical assistance efforts, and (3) to incorporate child outcome information into future Head Start Programs monitoring reviews, (Meisels et al., 2004).

The NRS consists of five subtests: two measure English-language competence (Spanish version available), one evaluates receptive vocabulary knowledge, one focuses on letter names, and the final subtest addresses mathematics (Meisels et al., 2004). The vocabulary subtest is adapted from the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III (PPVT-III), a test of receptive language skills such as listening comprehension. Issues related to the use of the PPVT-III use of the folding pictures that could be misinterpretative by the preschooler as another type of picture and the use of one common face with expression which fails to include different cultural and ethnic groups (Meisels et al., 2004). The NRS test, eventually, provided the Head Start teacher with limited information concerning the preschoolers' social-emotional growth, physical development, science, social studies, the arts, and literacy. Phonemic awareness is omitted from the NRS test (Meisels et al., 2004).

Additionally, federal and state early childhood standards require educators to demonstrate the impact of early education programs upon the preschoolers and Head Start families (Grisham-Brown, Hallam, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2008). Unfortunately, many early childhood educators

continue to rely on norm-referenced, general assessment practices, early learning standards that are difficult at best to translate into well-formulated progress-monitoring information and child outcomes (Grisham-Brown et al., 2008). Previous reports such as the Westinghouse Learning Corporation, in 1969, revealed that IQ gains by children in preschool programs dissipated by the time they reached third grade. The Westinghouse Learning report was criticized during the 60's by the Head Start administration for its lack of validity. Since then more comprehensive studies have taken place to address whether or not Head Start Programs are advantageous to preschoolers living in poverty (Holden, 1990).

## References

- Aber, J. L., Hammond, A. S., & Thompson, S. M. (2010). U.S. ratification of the CRC and reducing child poverty: Can we get there from here? *Child Welfare*, 89(5), 159 -175.
- Bratton, S. C., Ceballos, P.L., Sheely-Moore, A. I., Meany-Walen, K., Pronchenko, Y., & Jones, L. D. (2012). Head start early mental health intervention: Effects of child-centered play therapy on disruptive behaviors. *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 22(1), 28 -42.
- Caputo, R. K. (2004). The impact of intergenerational head start participation on success measuring among adolescent children. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 25(2), 199-223.
- Catone, W. V., & Brady, S. A. (2005). The inadequacy of individual and educational program (IEP) goals for high school students with word-level reading difficulties. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 55(1), 53 – 78.
- Crosnoe, R. (2006). Health and the education of children from racial/ethnic minority and immigrant families. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 47(1), 77-93.
- Gallagher, J. J. (2000). The beginnings of federal help for young children with disabilities. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 20(1), 3.
- Goodway, J. D., & Branta, C. F. (2003). Influence of a motor skill intervention on fundamental motor skill development of disadvantaged preschool children. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 74(1), 36-46.
- Green, B. L., Malsch, A. M., Kothari, B. H., Busse, J. & Brennan, E. (2012). An intervention to increase early childhood staff capacity for promoting children's social-emotional development in preschool settings. *Early Childhood Education*, 40, 123-132.
- Greenwood, C. R., Carta, J.J., & McConnell, S. (2011). Advances in measurement for universal screening and individual progress monitoring of young children. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 33(4), 254 – 267.



- Grisham-Brown, J., Hallam, R. A., & Pretti-Frontczak, K. (2008). Preparing head start personnel to use a curriculum-based assessment an innovative practice in the “age of accountability”. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 30(4), 271-281.
- Guo, G. (1998). The timing of the influences of cumulative poverty on children’s cognitive ability and achievement. *Social Forces*, 77(1), 257-287.
- Harris, D. N. (2009). Toward policy-relevant benchmarks for interpreting effect sizes: combining effects with costs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31(1), 3-29.
- Henry, G. T., Gordon, Craig, S., Rickman, D. K. (2006). Early education policy alternatives: Comparing quality and outcomes of head start and state prekindergarten. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 28(1), 77-97.
- Heydon, R. M., & Wang, P. (2006). Curricular ethics in early childhood education programming: A challenge to the Ontario kindergarten program. *McGill Journal of Education*, 41(1), 29-46.
- Holden, C. (1990). Head start enters adulthood. *Science*, 247(4949), 1401-1403.
- Justice, L.M., Mashburn, A., Pence, K. L., & Wiggins, A. (2008). Experimental evaluation of a preschool language curriculum: Influence on children’s expressive language skills. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 51(4), 983-1001.
- Kaczmarek, L. A., Goldstein, H., Florey, J. D., Carter, A., & Cannon, S. (2004). Supporting families: A preschool model. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 24(4), 213-226.
- Kern, B. B. (2002). Enhancing accounting students’ problem-solving skills: The use of a hands-on conceptual model in an active learning environment. *Accounting Education*, 11(3), 235-256.
- Lee, K. (2009). The bidirectional effects of early poverty on children’s reading and he home environment scores: Associations and ethnic differences. *Social Work Research*, 33(2), 79-94.
- Lee, V. E. (1998). Does head start work? A 1-Year follow-up comparison of disadvantaged children attending head start, no preschool, and other preschool programs. *Developmental Psychology*, 24(2), 210-222.
- Lee, V. E., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Schnur, E. (1988). Does head start work? A 1-year follow-up comparison of disadvantaged children attending Head Start, no preschool, and other preschool programs. *Developmental Psychology*, 24(2), 210-222.
- Meisels, S. J., & Atkins-Burnett, S. (2004). The head start national reporting system: A critique. *Young Children*, 59(1), 64-66.

- Muncy, R. (2009). Coal-Fired Reforms: Social Citizenship, Dissident, Miners, and the Great Society. *The Journal of American History*, 96(1), 72-98.
- Olson, P.D.& Olson, J. (1997). Structural choices for growing head start programs. *Allied Academies International Conference Academy of Educational Leadership*, 2(2), 8-16.
- Pressman, S. (2011). Policies to reduce child poverty: Child allowances versus tax exemptions for children. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 45, 323-332.
- Ramey, C. T., & Ramey, S. L. (2004). Early learning and school readiness: Can early intervention make a difference? *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 50(4), 471-491.
- Redden S. C., Ramey, S. L., Ramey, C. T., Forness, S. R., & Brezausek, C. M. (2003). Special education placements among former head start children in kindergarten: A descriptive multi-site study. *Education & Treatment of Children*, 26(2), 128-148.
- Ripple, C. H., Walter, S. G., Channana, N., & Zigler, E. (1999). Will fifty cooks spoil the broth? The debate over entrusting Head Start to the States. *American Psychologist*, 54(5), 327-343.
- Rikoon, S. H., McDermott, P.A., & Fantuzzo, J. W. (2012). Approaches to learning among head start alumni: Structure and validity of the learning behaviors scale. *School Psychology Review*, 41(3), 272-294.
- Vanderstaay, S. L. (2006). Learning from longitudinal research in criminology and the health sciences. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(3), 328-350.
- Zigler, E. (2003). What would draw a basic scientist into Head Start (and why would he never leave)?. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.) , *Psychologists defying the crowd: Stories of those who battled the establishment and won* (pp. 273-282). American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/10483-016