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# HEAD START: A TRUE START TO GETTING AHEAD: A LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE HEAD START PROGRAM AS A PRIMARY POVERTY PREVENTION STRATEGY

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## **ABSTRACT**

The federal Head Start Program plays a vital role in increasing the likelihood that under-privileged children will become academically successful in school, attend college, and become successful citizens. Yet, Head Start continuously struggles to retain its funding and is challenged in its goal of assisting low income children. A review of the literature on Head Start and related early childhood education longitudinal studies will attest to the importance of this program as a primary prevention strategy to reduce poverty, raise public awareness of its benefits, and support the efforts of its advocates to retain and expand its funding at local and federal levels.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The Need for Early Education**

There is an epidemic in our country affecting not only the homeless, starving families and the bottom 99% of the population, but also promotes the probability that these groups will remain disadvantaged, oppressed, and vulnerable. The epidemic affects a population of under-educated children, and promotes a vicious cycle of poverty that not having early education creates. Because a lack of early education creates a cycle of poor living for people living in poverty, it becomes vital that proactive efforts are made to ensure that every low-income child has the opportunity to participate in the Head Start Program.

Nicholas Kristof has written that "...although part of the problem is billionaires being taxed at lower rates than those with more modest incomes, a bigger source of structural inequity is that many young people never get the skills to compete" (Kristof, pg. 1). This describes an entire population of young people who have little access to educational resources and little support growing up. It has been proven that educated individuals have a better chance at getting good jobs with good benefits, and are less likely to depend on the social welfare system (Kristof, pg. 2). Giving them the vital resources they need to compete can help solve America's poverty problem. But in order to really make a difference, these resources have to be in place before children reach kindergarten.

Kathleen McCartney, Dean of the Harvard School of Education, has noted the substantial difference in performance between poor and rich children, even before kindergarten. She states, "The reason early education is important is that you build a foundation for school success. And success breeds success" (Kristof, pg. 1). It is evident that education plays a vital role in determining one's success. Children living in poor communities, deprived of adequate resources such as good schools and teachers, do not have an equal opportunity to climb the ladder of success. To ensure that every child has the chance for a successful future, learning the skills needed to compete has to begin early. This is why early education programs like Head Start are so important. Children in poor communities not only lack adequate elementary school resources, but also lack early education programs (*Head Start*, 2011). Because of this, sustaining funding and maintaining advocacy for programs such as Head Start is even more important.

According to *Why Investments in Early Childhood Work, 2011*, poor children are 25% more likely to drop out of school, 40% more likely to become a teen parent, 50% more likely to be placed in special education, 60% more likely never to attend college, and 70% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime. With early education, the likelihood of these negative outcomes stemming from a lack of educational resources diminishes (*Why Investments in Early Childhood Work*, pg. 1). Studies such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program, the Abecedarian Proj-

ect, and the Head Start Impact Study all show that investing in early learning programs for children living in poverty increases the chances that children grow up to complete high school, attend college, and are more stable behaviorally, emotionally and in their learning capabilities. In addition, these children are better equipped to compete for employment positions and higher wages when they become adults, are more financially secure, and are better able to contribute to the economy (Hoye, pg. 1). At the same time, children with the advantage of early learning programs have a higher quality of learning that decreases the odds that they will fall prey to the statistics shown above.

Early education not only has an effect on the child but it also impacts the child's environment. Helping children overcome adversity and progress through school allows them to have a successful future, which promotes positive changes in the people and communities around them. School environments conducive to learning are created when disadvantaged students are given the behavioral and educational resources they need to succeed (Hoye, pg. 2). Their peers look up to them and are motivated to learn and be productive. Hoye reports that statistics on the number of minority children successfully progressing through school, especially African American and Latino children, then start to improve (pg. 2, 6), leading to a reduction in crime and drug use in the schools and surrounding neighborhoods. Less money is spent on misconduct, drug use and teen pregnancy, resulting in lower-cost health care. The amount of money used to support these individuals later in life, if and when they are on welfare, decreases ( pg. 2).

There are also benefits to the larger society as a result of having children enrolled in Head Start. Head Start helps to create positive behaviors and by doing so, crime and subsequent costs to the victims and the surrounding community are reduced. In fact, children who participated in Head Start were significantly less likely to be charged with a crime than their non-attending siblings (*Benefits of Head Start and Early Head Start Programs*, 2011). As mentioned earlier, the economic benefits of children's participation in Head Start include higher employment rates, increased earnings and potential bonuses, personal and familial stability and

a decreased dependency on the welfare system. Taxpayers benefit from Head Start, too. Social problems such as substance abuse, criminal activity, and social welfare dependency put a financial and emotional burden on tax payers. Because of this, making sure Head Start is maintained is very important (*Benefits of Head Start and Early Head Start Programs*, 2011). The program provides a way to prevent and combat such burdens. It creates a balance between the Head Start participants, the taxpayers and society as a whole.

Once schools and neighborhoods improve, new people may start to move in. This can be concluded because people of higher socio-economic status tend to be attracted to productive neighborhoods, especially ones with good quality community school systems (Blakeslee, 1978). In the reverse sense, as demonstrated in the practice of gentrification in Brooklyn, New York, the people who once left for the suburbs started to return when the neighborhoods improved, (Chang & Florian, 2008). Though gentrification can produce negative outcomes, the renewing of impoverished areas is positive. Neighborhoods with a higher tax base are inhabited by people with more money to contribute to the area's economy (Chang and Florian, 2008), leading to better school systems. Ultimately, there is an overall reduction of poverty because investing in school systems and programs such as Head Start is directly linked to the reduction of poverty (Hoye, 2010).

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **The History of Head Start**

Head Start (HS) is the nation's first national early education and early child care program (*Basic Head Start Facts Sheet*, 2011). During the Kennedy Administration, Attorney General Robert Kennedy wanted to find a solution to juvenile delinquency. His team of experts came to the conclusion that poverty was one cause. The next president, Lyndon Johnson, then declared a "War on Poverty" (Alexandria, 2011, p. 1). As a former Texas teacher, President Johnson believed that education was the key component to combating poverty, which would in turn decrease juvenile delinquency. Sargent Shriver composed a plan with a fourteen-expert panel to promote social competence through resources like

education, health care, social services, and parental involvement. They recommended the creation of Head Start (Alexandria, 2011).

In the beginning, Head Start was first an eight-week summer program staffed by thousands of volunteers. More than 561,000 children applied and every child was accepted, regardless of the overwhelming number or the limited amount of staff. As time went on, the summer program became a nine-month, half day program, and the qualifications and standards increased (Alexandria, 2011). In 1972, the Council for Professional Recognition raised the HS staff qualification to the level of the Child Development Associate (CDA). In 1974, Head Start Reauthorization Legislation called for standardized program standards. In 1988, Congress authorized a 5-year program that provided services to low income families with infants. By 1992-93, there were 34 such programs in existence, with 10 of them emphasizing families with substance abuse problems. Sixty-six Family Service Center Projects were funded in 1990 to promote self-sufficiency by addressing the needs of HS families struggling with illiteracy, substance abuse and unemployment. And in 1994, Congress passed the Head Start Reauthorization Act, which expanded the program and called for a re-evaluation and revision of the program's overall standards (Alexandria, 2011).

After the 1994 Head Start Reauthorization, HS was expanded to include another component: Early Head Start (EHS). Head Start serves at-risk children living in poverty from prenatal to age three. It also serves the pregnant women and their families. These programs serve children in families at or below the federal poverty level (Alexandria, 2011). At present over one million children are served by HS and EHS programs. Since the inception of the program, over 30 million children and pregnant mothers have participated (*About Head Start*, 2012).

### **Head Start Participants**

According to the National Head Start Association (NHSA), the population benefitting most from HS consists of poor white children and pregnant women. This population of beneficiaries accounts for 40% of the HS population. Blacks account for 30% of the program's population, and bi- or multi-racial groups account

for just 8%. The remaining 22% self-identifies as “other.” According to reports, Hispanic children and pregnant women account for 36% and Non-Hispanic for 64%. Whites make up the largest number of HS participants (*Basic Head Start Facts Sheet*, 2011).

One million participants receive services at more than 2,873 HS locations across the country, with a concentration in California, Texas, and New York (*Basic Head Start Facts Sheet*, 2011; *About Head Start*, 2011). Grantees and delegate agencies— places that receive grant money from the government to operate as a HS location— include community action agencies, public and private school systems, non-profit agencies, including churches and hospitals operating as non-profits, and for-profit hospitals and government agencies. In Michigan, there are 76 HS locations and 39 EHS locations that serve over 38,000 children and their families (*About the Michigan Head Start Association*, 2012). All of the locations provide the same services and work towards the same common goal: to help children living in poverty become better able to compete for jobs, have a healthier and more stable social environment, a stable financial future, and to reduce poverty.

The resources offered to these children and their families go beyond ordinary education, healthcare, and parental involvement. The services include school readiness and cognitive development services, frequent medical screenings, immunizations and dental services, nutritional assistance, referral services for a range of individual child and family needs, and the opportunity for parents to participate in school decision-making (Head Start, 2011). Some of the other detailed services Head Start offers are mental health services and preschool services at no cost, healthcare access to poor families, support for parent-child relationships, securing employment for parents, and daycare/caretaker services for the children (Hoye, 2010).

There are currently over 242,000 paid Head Start and Early Head Start staff members and contractors, and there are over 1,335,000 volunteers. Of those volunteers, over 881,000 of them are HS / EHS parents (Basic Head Start Facts, 2011). Many volunteers are the participants’ fathers, which sets a good example, especially for the young boys.

## **Funding for Head Start**

Despite widespread support, HS struggles to meet the needs of its participants. In 1965, \$96.4 million tax dollars funded services for 561,000 children in summer programs. In the mid to late 1970's, this figure increased to \$680 million. In 1989, funding increased to \$1.2 billion for 450,000 children (note the increase in money but a decrease in participants). The Human Service Reauthorization Act of 1990 increased funding to serve eligible 4 year olds, and in 1994 it increased funding to serve 30% of eligible 5 year olds. The Reauthorization Act of 1994 expanded Head Start and created Early Head Start for pregnant women. By 1995, federal funding was at \$3.53 billion for 752,000 children and families; in 2000, funding increased to \$5.2 billion, and at present \$6.8 billion is budgeted for Head Start (Alexandria, 2011).

The government pays 80% of the total costs to run these centers, leaving the local center and surrounding community with the obligation of securing the rest of the funding. This is another reason why volunteers, and assistants from non-profits are so vital to Head Start (*Basic Head Start Facts*, 2011). Non-profit organizations raise money, solicit charitable donations, purchase supplies, and at times house HS programs in their buildings.

## **Goals of Head Start**

According to the National Head Start Association (NHSA), its first and most important goal is to decrease the achievement gap between lower-class and middle-class children (*Benefits of Head Start and Early Head Start Programs*, 2011). By offering special educational services to children living in poverty, HS hopes to improve the standardized test scores and cognitive functioning of those children. Children who go through HS and EHS often reach a national level of intelligence in reading, writing, and mathematical skills by the time they enter kindergarten. They are less likely to repeat a grade, have to take special education classes, and are more likely to pass on to the first grade. EHS students have larger vocabularies and better speech. HS students have fewer behavioral problems, are more disciplined, and have a

higher level of social-emotional development. Students from HS are more likely to graduate from high school and go on to college (*Benefits of Head Start and Early Head Start Programs*, 2011).

The physical health of HS participants is also improved. Mortality rates for 5-9 year olds who received health care services from HS and EHS are 33-50% lower. The national decline in mortality rates in this age group has been linked to HS (*Benefits of Head Start and Early Head Start Programs*, 2011). More children received dental care by participating in HS than those who did not participate. The overall health of children in HS and EHS was described as “good” or “excellent,” when compared to children who were not in the programs (*Benefits of Head Start and Early Head Start Programs*, 2011). The parents of participants also experienced positive results from being involved in those programs, such as a greater quality of life, increased ability to cope with life’s obstacles, increased confidence, and decreased feelings of sickness, anxiety, and depression. Head Start was shown to reduce childhood obesity, and participants are more likely to receive immunizations (*Benefits of Head Start and Early Head Start Programs*, 2011).

### **Studies on the Effectiveness of Head Start**

Many studies have been done to test the effects of early education programs. Some of the best known studies include the *High Scope/Perry Preschool Study* (1962), the *Carolina Abecedarian Project* (1972), and the more recent *Head Start Impact Study* (2010). Each study concludes that early education programs work to better equip children for academic and social advancement, and reduce poverty overall.

The study that paved the way for early education was the *High Scope/Perry Preschool Project*. Though unaffiliated with Head Start, its goals were the same and its outcomes very similar. The Project began just three years prior to the start of HS and worked to provide special services to children in need. In 1962, David Weikart, Director of Special Services for the Ypsilanti Public Schools, started the Perry Preschool Project, which was later called *High Scope/Perry Preschool Study* (Woodard, 2011). Wei-

kart noted that high school students from the poorest areas in Ypsilanti were performing at failing levels. He attributed their low test scores to a lack of adequate early educational resources. Working with three elementary school principals, Raymond Kingston, John Saleau and Eugene Beaty, an early educational program was created to meet the needs of poor three and four year olds (Hohmann and Weikart, 2008). Some education experts criticized the project in the belief that young children were not mentally and emotionally mature enough to benefit from early education services. Weikart decided to conduct a study in order to test the benefits of such programs (Hohmann and Weikart, 2008).

The landmark Perry Preschool Project selected 123 African American three and four year olds from impoverished homes in Ypsilanti, MI., to participate in the study. More than half of their parents had only an elementary school education. Almost half of the households were fatherless. Of the families with fathers, more than half of the men were unemployed (*New York Amsterdam News*, 1980). Fifty-eight of the children were randomly assigned high-quality educational services and care. The rest received no special services. The study assessed the children's academic and social progress annually, from the ages of 3 to 11, then at 14, 15, 19 and 27. The researches did their final assessment at age 40.

The study found that not only were the children who participated in the early education program more likely to hold a job, have higher earnings, commit fewer crimes, and have a higher rate of high school completion, the overall return to society was more than \$16 for every \$1 invested in the early care and education program (Woodard, 2011). The study's findings indicated that 65% of the group who received services went on to graduate from high school, as opposed to 45% of the ones who did not receive services; a majority of the graduates who received services were females (84%), compared to 32% in the control group; 76% of the group who received services were employed by age 40, compared to 62% of the non-receiving group; members of the group earned, on average, \$5,000.00 more annually, and more of them owned their own homes (Woodard, 2011).

These findings were similar to those in recent studies of Head Start. The Head Start Impact Study shows that early education programs such as HS and EHS provide measurable benefits to their participants, and to society at large. Opposing studies have been few; the most influential of those was the Westinghouse Study, which stated that children in Head Start were only slightly better off than non-attending children, and therefore, early education programs in general did not work (Barnett and Hustedt, 2005). According to a *New York Amsterdam News* article, and as illustrated by the previous statistics, the High Scope/Perry Preschool Project found that participants at age 15 were found to have substantially outperformed their counterparts and were less likely to commit crimes or be involved in vandalism (*New York Amsterdam News*, 1980). They also had a better relationship with their parents. The Perry Preschool Project's success represented the benefits of all early education programs.

The Carolina Abecedarian Project was similar to the High Scope/Perry Preschool Project and attested to the benefits of early education programs such as Head Start. The study consisted of 111 children who were low income and pre-disposed to having cognitive difficulties. The primarily African-American children who were identified as infants in the 1970s were divided into a control group and an experimental group (Barnett and Hustedt, 2005). The experimental group received full-day, year round early education services from infancy to the age of five. In addition, half of each of the control and experimental groups received three years of intervention services.

The study found that, by the age of 21, participants from the experimental group who received five years of intervention services had better outcomes, with stronger academic skills and test scores, when compared to the control group, regardless of whether they received three years of intervention or not (Barnett and Hustedt, 2005). They were more likely to attend a four-year college, and were more likely to hold a job that was skill-based. At the time of this study, it was found that the benefits and dollar return to the economy outweighed the cost of the program, with

\$4 saved for every dollar spent on intervention services for preschoolers (Barnett and Hustedt, 2005).

The Head Start Impact Study was mandated by Congress in 1998. It examined a sample of HS participants and compared them to a control group of children from other early childhood settings. Conducted between 2002 and 2003, the study found that there were significant differences between the children in HS from those in the other early education programs. The Head Start group outperformed the control group in every measured category (*Head Start Impact Study Final Report*, 2011).

The Head Start Impact Study assessed participants' cognition, social-emotional development, health, and child-parent relationships. The students in the Head Start Program not only performed higher in those areas than those in the control group, but were also found to be better prepared for elementary school than their counterparts. However, the study showed that by the end of first grade, the children in HS had lost many of the advantages that led to their increased performance in kindergarten (*Head Start Impact Study*, 2011). Critics have used that data to question the efficacy of HS. The authors of the study suggest that improvements be made to the connections between the services that participants receive, and the additional services they may need for their continued success (*Head Start Impact Study*, 2011).

### **Barriers and Possible Solutions for Head Start**

Opponents of the Head Start Program do not hesitate when voicing criticism of HS and other early education programs. This poses a threat to the continuation of HS (Vinci, 2011). A lack of awareness about Head Start also contributes to this threat. Some eligible families may not be aware of its benefits, which could reduce the number of participants. Though HS currently enrolls some one million children, data suggest that over 20 million children are eligible for its services, with 4 million children living below the poverty line (*Pros and Cons of Early Years Programs*, 2011).

Another barrier to Head Start is its lack of funding. Investing in early education has been shown to be less expensive than

paying for poor academic progress, healthcare and crime later in life. Historically, the government has chosen to invest more money into higher education and the high costs that come along with it. These subsequent costs include correcting skill deficiencies that could have been prevented with early intervention (Scott-Clayton, 2011). According to Scott-Clayton (2011), in 2009 the government spent over \$50 billion on higher education in comparison to about \$19 billion on the Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Data on the effectiveness of these programs support the argument that increased funding of early education might lower the need for remedial programs in later years.

Head Start also needs vocal advocates and supporters. The National Head Start Association (NHSA) developed a Policy Agenda Plan for the year 2012 that outlines what needs to be done to sustain the HS Program. They began their policy plan with their vision, which included just two main points:

***To lead.** To be the untiring voice that will not be quiet until every vulnerable child is served with the Head Start model of support for the whole child, the family and community.*

***To advocate.** To work diligently for policy and institutional changes that ensure all vulnerable children and families have what they need to succeed (Vinci, 2011, p. 1).*

Not only is Head Start underfunded, it faces the risk of even more cuts from the government (Vinci, 2010). As stated above, the program already struggles with retaining funding to pay for the services it provides and the staff. According to the Policy Agenda Plan, Head Start took a 13% funding cut and is facing another 7-10% cut in 2013 (Vinci, 2011). Currently, a budget of \$7.984 billion funds 967,125 HS participants, when there are thousands more children and their families in need of the services the program provides. The demand for services is growing at an “alarming rate,” and with over 25% of the United States’ children living in poverty, ensuring funding, and protecting and expanding the HS program, is vital (Vinci, 2011).

The National Head Start Association 2012 Policy Agenda Plan identifies other barriers, including poor collaboration between school districts and HS, the need for revision of performance standards for the program, and the difficulty the program faces in raising its portion of the money needed to sustain it (Vinci, 2010). The federal government provides 80% of Head Start's funding and, because of the difficult economic times, budget cuts and decreased donations make it hard for the program to provide the additional 20% (Vinci, 2010). Outlined in the 2012 Policy Agenda, the NHSA made suggestions that would help remove these barriers.

To create and improve existing relationships between Head Start and school districts, the Agenda suggests that the President and Congress approve the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA gives incentives to the school districts that provide early childhood education programs for children ranging in age from birth to eight years of age (Vinci, 2010). In addition, to ensure that the services to these children are appropriate, the NHSA recommends that the office of HS evaluate and revise the Head Start Performance Standards. The standards have not been revised since the mid 1990s. It is suggested that the standards can be revised by looking at the research conducted on the HS and EHS Programs, evaluating the evidence, figuring out what worked and what did not work, and strengthening what is shown to be the best practices from the evidence (Vinci, 2010).

In relation to the financial barriers the HS Program faces, the NHSA suggests that Congress and President Obama make Head Start a priority. Instead of cutting funding another 7 to 10% for the program, sustained funding should be available (Vinci, 2010). It has also been recommended that, because of the extraordinary benefits from HS and EHS, these early education programs be exempt from the 2013 budget cuts (Vinci, 2010).

The National Head Start Association also notes that the program has difficulty in contributing their 20% of the program's funding. Under the Head Start Act, that 20% share can be waived. NHSA recommends that the share waivers be granted on a regular basis and in a timely fashion (Vinci, 2011), which would greatly benefit centers that are struggling.

Other recommendations outlined in the 2012 Policy Agenda include making sure that HS and EHS facilities are maintained and replaced when needed. This can be accomplished with policy changes that allow for facility upkeep funding (Vinci, 2010). The NHSA, which advocates for Head Start, will continue to speak on behalf of the program's benefits and fight for sustained funding.

## CONCLUSION

Numerous studies such as the *High Scope/Perry Preschool Study*, the *Abecedarian Project* and the *Head Start Impact Study*, and in the literature presented in this paper, clearly show that Head Start, Early Head Start, and early education programs are successful. The benefits are extraordinary and life changing. Over one million at-risk children and their families take advantage of the Head Start Program, and the benefits of the program are long-lasting.

In Washtenaw County, Michigan, where the earliest study on early education programs was conducted, a great deal is being done to raise awareness about the Head Start Program, and to promote advocacy efforts on its behalf. The Washtenaw County Board of Executives approved a 2012 budget in November that included \$528,048 for Head Start (Whitesall, 2012). That money might be eliminated in 2013 due to budget cuts. After 46 years of providing HS services, Washtenaw County will not be a grantee of HS. When this happens, Health and Human Services will begin looking for a new local grantee to run the program (Whitesall, 2012).

Many counties already use community action agencies and school districts as local grantees. Until then, Marilyn Gatewood, the Washtenaw County Head Start Program Services Manager says that, "the kids will continue to get the best pre-school experience their teachers can give," (Whitesall, 2012, p. 19). Larry Schweinhart, President of the High Scope Foundation, has commented that, "... the program helps kids who need it the most—not just now, but all their lives," (Whitesall, 2012, p. 19).

It is vital that Head Start continues. As Dr. Marti Bombyk, a Professor of Social Work at Eastern Michigan University, states: "I had an educator tell me once that he could look at all the kids

in his school and tell me which ones would go to jail... He had already written them off. Early Childhood Education writes them on” (Whitesall, 2012, p. 22).

Head Start is one of the most important preventative measures one can take to help ensure that a child has great opportunities in life. This is especially critical for families living in poverty. Advocates are needed to spread the word about its benefits and to speak of its importance to our entire community.

More research should be conducted on the effectiveness of Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Current data on who uses the program, how often, and the effect on the participants later in life will attest to the importance of continued Head Start funding.

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