

POSTER SYMPOSIUM

Enhancing School Readiness: The Head Start Quality Research Center Studies (2001–2006)

Chair: Martha S. Abbott-Shim

Discussants: Oscar A. Barbarin, Gayle Cunningham

Presenters: Janet E. Fischel, Marijata Daniel-Echols, Lawrence J. Schweinhart, Nancy Clark-Chiarelli, Jesse Gropen, Rachel Peters Razza, Richard G. Lambert, Julia L. Mendez, Donna M. Bryant, Ellen S. Peisner-Feinberg, Edward G. Feil, Annemieke Golly, Kwang Kim

- **Curriculum Approaches to Enhance Early Literacy in Head Start**
Janet E. Fischel, Stacey Storch Bracken
- **Effects of a Preschool Curriculum Course on Head Start Program Practices and Child Outcomes**
Marijata Daniel-Echols, Zongping Xiang, Lawrence J. Schweinhart
- **Program-Delivered Professional Development: Is It Effective?**
Nancy Clark Chiarelli, Jesse Gropen, Bail Bolte
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Rachel Peters Razza, Lizabeth Malone, Katherine Renee Behring, Sharon Lynn Kagan, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn
- **Association Between the Intensity of Implementation of a Head Start Mentor Teacher Intervention and Child Outcomes in Protégés' Classrooms**
Martha S. Abbott-Shim, Richard G. Lambert
- **Connecting Head Start Parents and Teachers to Promote School Readiness and Parent Teacher Involvement: The Companion Curriculum Intervention**
Julia L. Mendez
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Donna M. Bryant, Ellen S. Peisner-Feinberg, Janis B. Kupersmidt, Mary Ellen Voegler-Lee
- **Teacher Training to Promote School Readiness and Reduce Antisocial Behavior Within Head Start**
Edward G. Feil, Annemieke Golly, Hill M. Walker, Herbert Severson, Jason Small
- **Emerging Themes for Quality Research Center Head Start Programs Regarding Research Partnerships**
Nancy Clark-Chiarelli, Richard G. Lambert
- **Lessons From Coordinated Data Collection for a Diverse Set of Early Childhood Intervention Studies**

Kwang Kim, Margaret Daly, Alberto G. Sorongon, Nicholas Zill

Abbott-Shim: This portion of the symposium will be an opportunity for brief presentations and then extensive discussion and questions. The Quality Research Consortium (QRC) consists of eight academic researchers and two support organizations. The consortium has 5-year grant partnerships with Head Start Programs, and they have been designed to improve child outcomes through enhancements to curriculum, teacher training and mentoring, parent involvement, and assessment practices. The QRCs have common features and differences, though, as is clear when reviewing these posters. Common features are partnerships with Head Start agencies, an invaluable part of the program.

Quasi-experimental designs are another common characteristic of the QRCs, with random assignment of teachers, classrooms, or centers to treatment and control groups. Another common characteristic is the data collection system used with Westat. All studies used the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) measures, and the data were collected by trained and reliable data collectors that moved; they were not trained by each of the sites. Another shared characteristic is the replication of the interventions, whereby all interventions have been replicated with the original partner in one or more additional partner sites. The replication has been both implemented and evaluated at these additional sites.

The QRCs also have differences, which were the focus of the interventions. All of the Head Start programs have an intervention, and they use a variety of curricula. They receive extensive training and technical assistance, so the QRCs were working as an addition to that existing Head Start intervention. Some sites had comprehensive curricula that addressed all areas of development, all areas of classroom practices; others were more focused with specific add-on curricula, such as the area of preliteracy or social behavior.

Other differences among programs are the domains of child development, because some add-ons looked at a specific area and had more intensive data collection in that area. Other programs were more broadly based. The target areas also differed. QRCs focused on professional development, parent involvement, assessment systems, and specific domains of learning such as preliteracy. In addition, data collection using site-specific measures varied. The sites used their own measures to address specific issues that they had identified and wanted to look at in greater depth.

Sustainability also varied among the interventions. Some of the interventions built internal capacity for the Head Start program to maintain that intervention over time, whereas other interventions looked at specific curricula such as a comprehensive curriculum or enhancement curriculum that was purchased and therefore could be sustained with additional training or outlay of materials.

What does this research show? Curriculum enhancements can significantly improve child outcomes. Children in classrooms implementing literacy curricula have significantly higher scores on letter knowledge, emergent writing, book knowledge, and print knowledge. The social-emotional intervention showed significant improvements in teacher ratings of prosocial

behavior, and another QRC with a social-emotional intervention helped children make significant gains in language and literacy.

A lesson learned is that local capacity can be built to sustain training and quality improvement. The program-delivered literacy intervention at one QRC site showed that teachers improved their literacy-related teaching practices and sustained those gains over time. Curriculum implementation can be achieved with administrative support and time. Children in classrooms with teachers who received intensive curriculum training at one site showed larger gains in book knowledge, copying shapes and letters, and math skills.

Another lesson learned was that assessment systems can promote quality improvements and enhance child outcomes. A child-sensitive observational assessment system, along with interactive professional development, can provide and promote significant positive change in program climate at the central level, in classroom quality at the classroom level, and in cognitive development for children. In addition, home-school connections can increase parent involvement in a child's education. The parent involvement intervention at one QRC site shows a relationship to children's school readiness outcomes and increased parent engagement with reading to children at home.

Implementation quality can significantly impact child outcomes. One site looked at the implementation quality for the mentor-protégé intervention and found that high-intensity groups make statistically significant gains on total letters named, counting, word identification, and book knowledge.

Barbarin: This work is impressive, not because of any single piece, but because of the configuration of research done by the group. It is impressive to see researchers coordinate and utilize common measures in order to learn more than could be learned from individual studies. The approach was farsighted and brave because collaboration across multiple sites is difficult. The ability to compare programs across areas of literacy, social-emotional development, teacher training, individualized assessment, and parent involvement adds value. Instead of one study with 200 participants, there are now 29 Head Start programs involved, with 289 classrooms and over 2,000 children.

The lessons from the study were perhaps recognized previously in interventions. The more intense an intervention, the more likely it is that an effect can be achieved. Second, many problems that Head Start seeks to impact do not exist in isolation. Intervening at multiple levels in terms of systems, families, parents, teachers, administrators, and across domains within the child make a difference in the long run. Third, change occurs even with a single intervention. Interestingly, programs that focused on social-emotional outcomes, in fact, produced favorable academic outcomes. The other finding is perhaps the disappointment that almost all of the studies produced fairly small effect sizes, suggesting that these interventions may be on the right track. Perhaps these interventions are also too ambitious in the sense of anticipating that a small amount of input will produce a big outcome.

Mendez' study looked at the effect of parental involvement and attempts to increase parental involvement, and suggests that programs targeted towards families can make a difference.

Families who participate show an effect, but not everyone participates. This trend presents a challenge for programs promoting effective methods for helping families achieve specific outcomes but who have not been successful engaging those families. This study did not identify specific characteristics that would discriminate and separate which families were likely to participate and which ones were not. The reasons for this discrepancy may be family characteristics or that programs are not looking in the right places or recognizing how they interact with families.

One impressive program developed by the National Black Child Development Institute successfully engaged parents by starting with the parent as a developing adult, rather than starting with the child. The program focused on parent needs, aspirations, and goals, with parenting as one facet of the individual.

Bryant and Feil reported on programs that address social-emotional development and how to improve outcomes. The Second Step program, a good program, was not quite a success. It improved social competence among teenagers but was not as effective at curbing aggression; whereas the First Step program was able to impact aggressive behavior, or intensity. The First Step program focused on individualizing programs for children, whereas the Second Step program emphasized group circle time. In spite of these differences, it may be that the intensity is focused on the needs of the individual child, which may be important if one is addressing aberrant behaviors by trying to improve social confidence and positive behaviors.

Abbott-Shim and Lambert reported on a teacher-development program. What elements result in an effective teacher? The domains selected were interesting and relevant to the effects that were noticed, including helping the teacher focus on the learning environment, scheduling, curriculum, interactions with the child-assessment data, and the ability to individualize instruction. These skills need to be nurtured, and the protégé program was an effective means of skills development. This impressive body of work helps progress towards evidence-based practice and is also a reminder that inertia is a powerful force. Researchers must be modest and humble in their expectations.

Cunningham: The consortium partners have had a unique opportunity to come together over 5 years as partners for each project, but also as partners across all the projects. Head Start programs are not simply waiting idly for a researcher to come make a proposition. While Head Start did not emphasize outcomes for children until the late 1990s, programs have benefited from participation in this research. Programs have clear expectations of what to do with children and how to operate programs, and they require continuous attention from program administrators and staff. When program staff agree to participate in research or an evaluation project, they significantly add to their daily responsibilities.

Participation as partners has been voluntary, and knowledge and comfort with research has increased dramatically because of this participation. Some programs had experiences with research and evaluation before this consortium, while for others, it was the first time. In every case, it has been a positive and useful experience. Programs have been made to feel like partners rather than subjects of research. The interventions provided to the programs, and the partnerships developed, have been beneficial. These relationships are a resource for program

improvement, providing opportunities to be on the cutting edge of early childhood development or education. They have provided important opportunities for additional staff training to share new methods of working with children and parents. There have also been opportunities to refine use of data.

Challenges have arisen over the years for both the researchers and the partner programs. Some issues addressed have been incidental to program circumstances, leadership changes, differences in qualifications of staff, and capacities of staff. High-quality interventions can make a difference for staff, children, parents, and programs, although maybe not as dramatic a difference as hoped. The QRC project provides a message to both researchers and practitioners about the development and value of partnerships aimed at improving research and programs.

Feil: A small percentage of Head Start money goes into research even though Head Start is supposed to constantly change based on new research findings. Head Start is not a program but an evolving process, and Quality Research Centers are providing the research required to change the program.

Do not be despondent about small effect sizes. Some new scholars encourage research to focus more on the cost of interventions as part of the equation, rather than just effect size. Most of these interventions described are relatively cheap and worthwhile despite small effect size. The QRC impact was not only intended to reach the 2,000 children involved in the studies; Head Start has roughly 900,000 children enrolled, and programs would like to impact all of them. How can promising findings be packaged for Head Start programs all over the country?

Cunningham: The consortium has been part of outreach through the technical systems and training groups in the regions. All the research studies found small effects and, in fact, none of the projects spent more than one Full-Time Equivalent (FTE). One FTE in an average-sized Head Start program could get the interventions off the ground and do a reasonable job. For Head Start programs, the hardest part is to have the coordinator for mental health, developmental disabilities, or health decide what is most important.

Programs can learn about these interventions, but when they take them back to the program for implementation, programs must make judgments between all the other items mandated on the list. Despite the best intentions and training, programs do not always have procedures in place for support. One study tried to do this side-by-side with Head Start programs, to involve them as much as possible. Perhaps more time is necessary to provide programs with the expertise, or at least the ability to overcome not inertia but the status quo.

Schweinhart: Another name for quality enhancements might be an intervention on an intervention. It seems that all the QRC partners define Head Start as a living, breathing organization. These partners tried to intervene into an existing structure and culture of Head Start. For example, it is virtually impossible for a quality enhancement in Head Start to tinker with certified teachers. A teacher cannot be hired for a couple of years to evaluate how he or she works.

Another issue is substantial home visits tied together with a Head Start program. Weekly home visits or something at that level of intensity is critical to long-term effects, but can programs do that if they are set up to have teachers working in other ways? Maybe to the extent that teachers are involved in double sessions, in order to have the level of intensity desired with home visits, they should be freed up for one of these sessions.

The quality enhancements could not dig that deep. They could not radically transform Head Start, particularly against the backdrop of the small effect sizes that were found from the Head Start Impact Study, FACES, and all the quality enhancements. Head Start is a comprehensive child development program. All these attempts at intervention or quality enhancement have been unable to rise above a certain effect size. The challenge is how to make interventions radical enough to have an effect. Contrast a quality enhancement in an existing system with an intervention from scratch, which does not face an already conflicting culture. To address quality enhancement in an existing system, it is difficult to go beyond the current levels. This QRC consortium is a superb group to puzzle over that challenge and ask how to achieve the short-term effects that lead to long-term effects and return on investment.

Tarullo: After this 5-year period, what is the take-home message about the content of the intervention? There is such diverse content here on literacy, social-emotional issues, professional development, and so forth. Perhaps there should be a change to the focus of content. So much is heard about the need to improve literacy and the content of the social-emotional development process, and the process of professional development regardless of time.

Fischel: The consortia data must be reviewed to see what comes out from at least 4 years of interventions to decide whether it should impact at one level such as teacher development, or the administrative level, or the child level. For example, one of the QRC meetings presented data on positive social skills and their link to stronger outcomes in early literacy. It does matter which piece one tries to impact, but strong interrelationships exist across social-emotional skills, behavior problems, and literacy effects. Chapters of a book have different headings but are included in one whole. This consortium was also after choices. No one dictates Head Start's curriculum; that programs have a curriculum matters, but curricula manifest themselves in a hundred different ways for a hundred different Head Start grantees.

Abbot-Shim: Because Head Start is our laboratory, it will always focus on professional development. Head Start partners hire people, train them, and help them earn qualifications; but then these people leave. Process and professional development is where many Head Start programs will maintain strength. They are doing a service for the whole community because those people typically continue to serve families and children at other venues.

Comment: Two years ago at this meeting, an 11-state study was unveiled that raised the issue of whether a Bachelor's degree is necessary. Congress is currently moving towards demanding a Bachelor's degree, never mind Associate's degree, in Head Start. What is the importance?

Comment: This issue is critically important, as is where the person gets his or her education or certification. Is it from an educational institution or individual consultants? Is it from an institution that knows child development or early childhood education?

Cunningham: A program's internal capacity to provide ongoing training and support may matter more than any of those. If the program can provide day-to-day support to staff that helps improve teaching, it can make a bigger difference than a teacher's credentials; but there is insufficient emphasis on developing that internal structure within programs. There is no requirement for it, but it can make all the difference.

Fischel: The FACES study showed no significant findings that a person with a Bachelor's degree did better than a person with an Associate's degree.

Abbot-Shim: Requirements vary greatly within Head Start in different regions of the country. In some regions, teachers do not walk in with either Bachelor's or Associate's degrees. All programs are doing their best to improve the quality of the staff they presently have and those who are entering.

Kerr: Some research supports the notion that the tremendous amount of staff training within programs is a positive sign. A wealth of research is here, but Head Start has not found all the ways to get that information across in a package that can be used effectively.

Audience question: What is the next phase for these projects so that the results can be replicated?

Abbot-Shim: Funding for the Consortium has ended, and there has not been another request for proposals. Hopefully these efforts can continue. As far as the dissemination and getting the findings to programs, there has been extensive training and the Consortium has offered services to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) with their Research-to-Practice initiatives. Research is also typically published in journals, but that does not mean Head Start teachers and directors access that information.

Kerr: It is hoped that these internal research findings can influence the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Centers so that the information can be shared more broadly.