Head Start Policy

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Introduction

With more than $8 billion U.S. in federal funding during fiscal year 2015 and an enrolment of about 940,000 children,[1] Head Start is by far the U.S. federal government's largest education initiative for young children in poverty. Established in 1965, this federally funded program takes a comprehensive approach toward enhancing children's learning and development, offering a mix of educational, social, nutritional and health services to three- to five-year-olds and their low-income families. Through a much smaller but growing companion initiative, Early Head Start, services are also offered to children under age three and pregnant mothers.

Subject

Head Start is often viewed as the nation's "laboratory" for developing effective interventions for children in poverty. As such, issues affecting this program have broad implications for early childhood education policy in general. Head Start began as a part-day, summer-only program for most children. Today, children may enroll in Head Start/Early Head Start for two or more years, and many programs operate for a full school day or integrate with other programs to offer a longer day. Yet serious questions remain about the program's availability and effectiveness. What does research say about its outreach and outcomes? What are some of the major policy

issues Head Start will face in the future?

Problems

Head Start has faced challenges in meeting the goal of offering comprehensive services to children from low-income families. Chief among these difficulties is the fact that Head Start has not received sufficient funding to serve all children in poverty. Also, given that families move in and out of poverty, it has been an ongoing challenge to target the pool of children who might be eligible at a given time. Finally, the optimal mix of services (education, social, health, etc.), teacher qualifications (lower than required for all public kindergarten and some pre-k initiatives), and the curriculum (how and what to teach) are still matters of some debate.

Research Context and Key Research Questions

Since the late 1960s, there have been a number of studies of Head Start's impact, some suggesting that the program was effective and others suggesting that its benefits were transitory. Much of this research suffers from methodological drawbacks that make it difficult to interpret the findings. However, evidence supports the general conclusion that children attending Head Start receive both short- and long-term benefits.[2] Studies conducted over the past two decades have been methodologically stronger and provide better estimates of impact than earlier studies. A key question is: how much does attending Head Start affect children's development, compared to demographically similar children who do not attend?

Recent Research Results

Innovative and increasingly rigorous studies have broadened the knowledge base on Head Start, with new implications about how the program can better serve children.

In a study of Head Start's long-term effects, Garces, Thomas, and Currie[3] analyzed nationwide self-reported data on Head Start attendance to compare sibling pairs in which one sibling participated in the program and the other did not. Benefits reported in this study include increased high school graduation and college attendance rates for white participants, and reductions in criminal charges or convictions among African-American participants. Drawbacks of this research include an inability to confirm the accuracy of self-reported Head Start attendance, and use of the statistical assumption that one sibling's participation in Head Start has no effect on the non-participating sibling. Another creative approach to estimating Head

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Start's long-term benefits finds that Head Start increased high school completion and college attendance rates.[4]

In 1997, researchers began collecting data for a large-scale federally funded study known as the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES).[5] FACES was designed to investigate the impact of Head Start's educational and comprehensive services using nationally representative samples. This study is ongoing, with data now available for five cohorts of children. However, despite the scope of this descriptive study and its representative samples, no comparison groups were used, and the study has no sound method for inferring program impact on children's learning and development.

In a small-scale study, Abbott-Shim et al.[6] used a random assignment design to select children into a Head Start program with a waiting list. Head Start attendees were then compared to non-attendees. The researchers noted a variety of positive outcomes for Head Start attendees, including both cognitive and health domains for children, as well as in parents' health and safety habits.

The federally funded Head Start Impact Study[7] combines the best design features of previous Head Start research, employing a rigorous experimental design with a nationally representative sample of nearly 5,000 children. Beginning in 2002, three- and four-year-olds were randomly assigned to a Head Start group or a non-Head Start group, providing a better basis for examining the effects of Head Start and eliminating concerns regarding selection bias associated with earlier studies. This experimental design complements an earlier large-scale experimental study of Early Head Start,[8] which found positive short-term impacts for young children as well as their parents.

The Impact Study examined progress in cognitive, social-emotional, health and parenting domains for Head Start and non-Head Start children. Initial results showed modest outcomes for participating in a single year of Head Start. For example, the effect on receptive vocabulary was about 1/10 of a standard deviation, almost exactly what was found for Early Head Start. No significant effects were found on mathematics. After one year of participation, the strongest impact of Head Start was found on parent reports of children's literacy skills and receiving dental care. The design of the Impact Study also allowed researchers to examine longer-term effects into elementary school.[9] In general, longitudinal follow-up comparisons showed that initial positive outcomes found after one year of Head Start participation were not consistently

sustained through the end of third grade. While this research had a rigorous design, it is worth noting that there are some challenges in interpreting the data, due to issues including the fact that most comparison children participated in other preschool (or even Head Start) programs after being assigned to the study's control group.

Conclusions

While Head Start has been a topic of research for its entire history dating back to the 1960s, many questions remain. Findings from a body of more methodologically sound research over the past two decades indicate that Head Start participation yields modest positive outcomes in children. However, the magnitude of these impacts, and questions about the degree to which impacts are sustained, suggests that the program does not reach its full potential. A likely explanation is that the educational services offered by Head Start have been too weak. In particular, observational data indicate that instructional quality is lower than desired, while quality of emotional support is fairly strong. Improvement is likely to require more professional development and other investments in the workforce.[10] Head Start lacks the funding to hire teachers with qualifications on par with kindergarten teachers – specifically, bachelor's degrees – and to pay them comparable salaries. Head Start's most recent reauthorization required at least half of Head Start teachers in center-based programs to have bachelor's degrees by 2013, and by fiscal year 2015, 73% of teachers of preschool-age children in center-based Head Start settings held bachelor's degrees.[1] This has potential to increase the quality of Head Start services beyond the services offered when research such as the Head Start Impact Study began. However, when recruiting teachers with bachelor's degrees, Head Start must compete with public pre-k and kindergarten programs that pay higher salaries. As a result, teacher qualifications and compensation remain key issues in Head Start.

Implications

Head Start represents an early opportunity to help children in poverty achieve educational success. Yet at its current level of funding, the Head Start program is not able to serve all eligible children. For many of those it does reach, Head Start cannot provide a highly qualified teacher. Also, the benefits associated with Head Start participation are smaller in magnitude than those shown for more intensive model preschool initiatives.

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In setting priorities for the future of Head Start, policy-makers face several important decisions. Should Head Start programs be expanded to serve all children in poverty? How quickly will teacher qualifications be further improved, and what are the implications of higher teacher qualifications for teacher pay and teacher retention? How will Head Start programs coordinate with public pre-k programs that often serve similar populations of children? What mix of service components is optimal, and what type of curriculum should be offered? As Head Start continues to evolve, research on the program will further contribute to our knowledge of how to make interventions for children in poverty more effective.

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