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## Ask NHSA Dialog

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### **QUESTION FOR THE FIELD:**

Three important reports with implications for the effectiveness of early intervention programs for young children at risk were recently released. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study looked at short- and long-term effects of preschool across 40 years for 123 African Americans who were at risk for school failure. The findings of the study showed that those who had attended preschool had higher earnings in their jobs, were more likely to hold a job, committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to graduate from high school. A very recent report on the National Reporting System (NRS) from the National Head Start Association (NHSA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services illustrates the positive impact of Head Start on the school readiness of 4- and 5-year-olds. Children showed improvement in understanding spoken English, vocabulary, letter recognition, and early math skills than children who did not participate in this program. The FACES study demonstrated cognitive gains were made while in Head Start and children advanced toward national norms in writing and reading assessments.

Given her extensive research background in poverty and child and family policy, we at NHSA Dialog asked Jeanne Brooks-Gunn for her comments on the significance of these findings as well as how these findings should impact policy and practice in early intervention for at-risk populations.

### **Cause for Celebration? Sustained Effects of Early Childhood Education**

As all of us concerned with early childhood education (ECE), I was thrilled to see the most recent report from the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study. Now 40 years of age, the dramatic differences seen in early adulthood between those youngsters who received two years of half-day preschool and weekly home visits and those who did not have continued. The 123 individuals in the Perry Preschool Study have been heralded across the nation in thousands of newspaper articles, and their achievements touted in the U.S. Congress and in State Houses. Virtually any policy brief focusing on ECE, Head Start, or universal pre-K mentions this evaluation, and many frame their message around it.

At the same time, the Perry Preschool Study must be considered in context. Otherwise, we run the risk of over-promising the benefits of ECE, of under-emphasizing the difficulties in mounting and sustaining high quality ECE, and of downplaying the role of the early years in elementary school.

### **Over-promising takes many forms. These include the following:**

We rely on a handful of long-term random assignment evaluations of ECE from which to base our prognosis of success. These programs are not Head Start or pre-K programs, to which we wish to generalize the findings. However, they do focus on poor children, who are often the recipients of ECE.

The largest effects of the Perry Preschool Study were in reductions in crime, incarceration, and, to a lesser extent, employment. The economic return calculations suggest that 88% came from reduced crime and 4% from increased education. While incomes were higher, those in the treatment group were still not earning a lot of money (the median at age 40 was about \$20,000 a year; the Perry Preschool graduates were what we would call near poor, or in the second quintile of the income distribution; most would not be classified as lower middle class).

Why the sustained effects were so much more dramatic for crime is not known. And, it is unclear whether the other follow-ups in progress will also report the largest rewards in the area of crime rather than employment and education. Will we be disappointed if other ECE follow-ups show respectable sustained effects but not such large (and money-saving) effects?

I have argued that more modest effects are to be celebrated (Brooks-Gunn, 2003), especially given the length and intensity of most ECE programs. The difficulties in mounting such ECE are often under-emphasized. Consider, for a moment, some of the features of the Perry Preschool.

### **Children attended preschool for two years.**

They had highly educated teachers; all had graduated from college with certification and training in elementary school education and early childhood education. In the case of the Perry Preschool, they were paid at rates commensurate with elementary school teachers (about twice as much as the typical preschool teacher receives). The child to teacher ratios were small (6 to 8 children per teacher), again not the norm in most ECE programs. They used a well-developed curriculum and teachers were trained extensively. Home visits were conducted weekly.

The vast majority of ECE programs have not contained all these features. Low child to teacher ratios, college graduation and appropriate training, and reasonable salaries all involve increased funding levels. It is heartening that Head Start has made a concerted effort to help their teachers obtain certification and education. More stringent requirements for child-staff ratios are also welcome. And, the Performance Standards also lead Head Start toward more rigorously implemented curriculum. However, current programs do not have all the elements seen in the Perry Preschool (or, for that matter, the features of the Abecedarian or the Infant Health and Development Program, two others with similar features).

A related issue is that we still are not sure which components of a program are necessary. Almost all of our ECE evaluations have compared very intensive programs with a control group (two terrific exceptions are Project Hope/Abecedarian, where center-based programs plus home visiting could be compared to home visiting; see Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005 and the High/Scope Preschool Curriculum

Comparison Study, which had three different curriculum models). In a recent article for *The Future of Children* (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005), we reviewed what was known about the efficacy of parenting programs for enhancing school readiness and for reducing ethnic disparities in school readiness. We were hard-pressed to find examples of center-based programs without home visiting components, highlighting the importance placed on parent involvement. At the same time, few programs had the intensity of home visits seen in the Perry Preschool, in Abecedarian, or in the Infant Health and Development Program.

Yet another issue has to do with what children actually receive. Being enrolled in a program and attending are two different things. In the Infant Health and Development Program, for example, mini-vans transported the children to and from the child educational centers. While adding appreciably to the cost, it also probably increased the number of days that each child attended. Even then, variability occurred. We found that children who attended the centers over 350 days had much higher cognitive and achievement test scores at age 8 (five years after the intervention ended) than did those children who attended less (attendance for over 400 days in two years was the best; Hill, Waldfogel & Brooks-Gunn, 2002).

I believe that in our rush to promote ECE, we sometimes under-estimate the cost as well as the difficulty in providing services. I am often asked for the minimum set of elements necessary for ECE to produce sustained effects. It is impossible for me to give an answer, except to say, it cannot be done on the cheap. I also suggest that every policy-maker spend one week, or two days, in an ECE program

Underplaying the role of the elementary schools seems obvious, but sometimes overlooked. As Ed Zigler has said, we cannot inoculate children educationally just by offering one or two years of early childhood education. Our graduates of Head Start and other programs often go into schools that are not optimal. Clearly, we need to do a better job of integrating preschool and early elementary education.

## REFERENCES

- Brooks-Gunn, J., & Markman, L. B. (2005). The contribution of parenting to ethnic and racial gaps in school readiness. *The Future of Children*, 15, 141-168.
- Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). Do you believe in magic? What we can expect from early childhood intervention programs. *Social Policy Report*, XVII, 1-14.
- Hill, J., Waldfogel, J., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2002). Assessing the Differential Impacts of High-Quality Child Care: A New Approach for Exploiting Post-Treatment Variables. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 21, 601-627.

## **Additional information about the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study and FACES can be found at the following Web sites:**

<http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/PerryAge40SumWeb.pdf>

[http://www.nhsa.org/press/index\\_news\\_020305.htm](http://www.nhsa.org/press/index_news_020305.htm)