How the High/Scope Perry preschool study has influenced public policy

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Two years ago at this conference, I was privileged to present the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, an empirical examination of the enduring effects of a high-quality preschool program on participants who were born in poverty. Today I want to talk about the role that study has played in the development of the preschool research tradition and public policy. This story will shed light on the relationships between key studies, research traditions, and public policy.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study

David Weikart initiated the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993) in 1962 to address a local school district’s school failure problem. Today the study is well-known and has been influential in the development of public policy throughout the world. Two scientific features of the study have been critical to its success – strong internal validity because of its random assignment of 123 children living in poverty to either a program group or a no-program group and very complete data on a variety of measures, especially real-life status indicators, over 24 years. Data for the study were collected annually from ages 3 to 11 and at 14, 15, 19, and 27. The study continues today with data being collected from participants at ages 39 to 41. Here in a nutshell are the major findings.

Major Findings

The preschool program helped children get ready for school, having an immediate effect on their intellectual performance (64% vs. 27% with IQ of 90 or more at school entry).

Program participants achieved greater school success, as indicated especially by:

- Fewer placements in programs for mental impairment (15% vs. 34%)
- Higher basic achievement-test scores in middle school (49% vs. 15% with scores at 9th percentile or greater at age 14)
- A better high school grade point average (averaging 2.1 vs. 1.7 on a 4-point scale)
- A better on-time high school graduation rate (67% vs. 45%)
- A better literacy rate at the end of high school (61% vs. 38% scored average or better at age 19)

As adults, program participants achieved greater economic productivity and social responsibility, as indicated especially by:

- Higher adult earnings (29% vs. 7% earning $2,000 or more a month at age 27)
- More home owners (36% vs. 13% at age 27)
- Fewer receiving social services as adults (59% vs. 80% from ages 19 to 27)
- Fewer arrested 5 or more times (7% vs 35% by age 27)

An economic cost-benefit analysis found that over and above inflation and a 3 percent discount rate, the program returned 716 percent of its cost as savings to taxpayers on the costs of special education, social services, and criminal justice; more in taxes paid by higher earners; and savings to potential crime victims.

Dissemination of Study Findings

To date, we have issued four comprehensive reports on the study – at the end of the program (Weikart, Deloria, Lawser, & Wiegerink, 1970); age 10 (Weikart, Bond, & McNeil, 1978); age 15 (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1980); age 19 (Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, & Weikart, 1984); and age 27 (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993). Two additional reports detail the study’s cost-benefit analysis through age 10 (Weber, Foster, & Weikart, 1978) and age 27 (Barnett, 1996). We expect to report the
study findings through midlife in 2003. We have described the curriculum model used in the preschool program in a summary (Weikart & Schweinhart, 1987, 1991), a series of curriculum manuals (Weikart, Rogers, Adcock, & McClelland, 1971; Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, D. P., 1979; Hohmann & Weikart, 1995), and a considerable catalog of curriculum materials.

We have engaged in systematic dissemination to professional audiences by print and face-to-face presentation. We have contributed numerous articles to books (e.g., Schweinhart, 1987; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1983; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1988a; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1991) and journals (e.g., Farnworth, Schweinhart, & Berrueta-Clement, 1985; Schweinhart, Berrueta-Clement, Barnett, Epstein, & Weikart, 1985; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1985; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1988b). We have made invited presentations at gatherings of educators, policymakers, and advocates, at national association conferences in the U.S., state groups in most of the states, and similar groups throughout Great Britain and in other, mostly English-speaking, countries throughout the world. We have provided curriculum training, from a single session to seven-week programs, to early childhood educators throughout the U.S. and around the world and have a registry of about 1,500 certified High/Scope teacher trainers.

The conduit to influencing the public is news reporters. At the 1978 release of our age 10 report, we made our first initiated contact with a reporter, a local newspaper reporter. He subsequently reported the study in the Ann Arbor News; it appeared nowhere else. We decided we wanted to tell this story more widely, so in 1980, we reported the release of our age 15 report with a press release and press conference in New York City hosted by our funder, Carnegie Corporation of New York. The study received national news coverage. In 1984, we reported the release of our age 19 report with a press release and a press conference in Washington, DC. Contrasting with the new Reagan administration's desire to cut back on government programs, the story was reported widely, including coverage in the major weekly news magazines and on the national CBS Evening News. In 1993, we reported the release of our age 27 report with a press release and presentation at the annual conference of the Education Writers of America. Coverage was national and international, but not as intense as at age 19. For the release of our midlife report in 2003, we are working with a public relations specialist, who is planning a website and teleconference with child-and-family reporters throughout the U.S. and in other countries.

This systematic, widespread dissemination has made the study well-known. A search of the World Wide Web at this writing turned up 2,280 hits for the term “Perry Preschool,” as compared to 729 for the similar Abecedarian Project. But it was not just the intensity of the dissemination effort. To become well-known and widely cited, the story had to resonate with the public and the news reporters who represent the public for this purpose. For that matter, we ourselves had to want to tell the story. To understand our motives, we must consider how this study fits into the preschool research tradition.

The Preschool Research Tradition

In the past four decades, many studies have addressed the question of the effects of preschool programs for poor children. Most of them have examined immediate effects only. Some have examined long-term effects up to a few years after the program, and a few have looked at very long-term effects beyond childhood. Most have been quasi-experimental, finding where they could a comparison group who did not experience the preschool program. The recently reported evaluation of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001), for example, was very long-term, but quasi-experimental. A few have been experimental, employing random assignment of children to program and no-program groups, including in addition to the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, the Early Training Project (Gray, Ramsey, & Klaus, 1982), the Carolina Abecedarian Project (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, in press), and the Elmira Prenatal/Early Infancy Project (Olds et al., 1997).

These studies have been reviewed periodically over the past four decades (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Barnett, 1995; Yoshikawa, 1995; Karoly et al., 1998), including several quantitative meta-analyses (CSR, Inc., 1985; White, 1985). In the late 1970s, the principal investigators of some of the long-term studies banded together to collaborate in following up their studies.
Froebel launched the idea of kindergarten, a child’s garden, for 3- to 5-year-olds, in Germany in 1840, from which it spread throughout the world, narrowing its focus to 5-year-olds in the U.S. and some other places. In keeping with those times, his justifications were religious and philosophical, rather than empirical. Without any scientific evidence of its value, this downward extension of schooling from 6-year-olds to 5-year-olds has become virtually universal in the U.S. and other developed countries.

The contrast with preschool programs is stark. Ironically, “preschool” has come to mean ages 3 and 4, the years that were left when kindergarten’s focus narrowed to 5 years of age. The modern “preschool” began in the early 1960s with the work of Susan Gray in Tennessee and David Weikart in Michigan, then became institutionalized in the U.S. with the federal Head Start program in 1964-65, begun by President Lyndon Johnson and Sargent Shriver, first director of Johnson’s Office of Economic Opportunity.

Quantitative meta-analysis is the great leveler of specific research traditions, developing quantitative methodologies that are applied widely and even-handedly across diverse research traditions, from agriculture to medicine to education. The complement to quantitative analysis is qualitative analysis that focuses on the defining characteristics of a research tradition, the characteristics of methodology and substance that distinguish it from other research traditions. From this perspective, I’d like to describe two special features of the preschool research tradition. The first is that it exists at all. The second is the quest for long-term effects.

The Existence of the Preschool Research Tradition

Regarding the existence of the preschool research tradition, a simple comparison is revealing. So far as I know, there is no kindergarten research tradition or for that matter even one solid study examining the effects of the provision of kindergarten or other educational programs for 5-year-olds, such as British reception classes. There have been some studies comparing the effects of part-day kindergarten with full-school-day kindergarten (Rothenberg, 1995), a fact that actually underscores the lack of research on the more basic question of the value of kindergarten itself. Friedrich (Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983; Lazar, Darlington, Murray, Royce, & Snipper, 1982).

The findings of these studies may be summarized as follows. Many of them have found immediate effects of preschool programs for children born in poverty or otherwise at risk of school failure on their intellectual and social development. About a dozen studies, the ones mentioned above and a few others, have sought and found longer-term effects, particularly in preventing children from being retained in grade or placed in special education classes. A handful of studies have found very long-term effects, such as improving the high school graduation rate and reducing crime. As a rule, the longer-term the effect, the fewer the studies that have been in a position to identify it. This rule has sometimes been misunderstood to mean that there is contradictory evidence of very long-term effects, but that is not so. There is a critical difference between no evidence of effect and evidence of no effect.

In contrast with the total lack of demand for research justification of kindergarten, the demand for research justification of Head Start has been incessant. The story goes that Sargent Shriver got the idea for Head Start from Susan Gray’s experimental preschool program in Tennessee (Gray et al., 1983). Shortly after the national Head Start program began, a national evaluation by Westinghouse Learning Corporation (1969) found that the program had no effects of any consequence. This conclusion led pretty directly to cutbacks in federal Head Start funding and, subsequently, the formation of the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies. The Consortium finding that its model preschool programs led to reduced need for grade retention and placement in special education classes temporarily restored confidence in Head Start. Subsequent reports of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1980; Berrueta-Clement et al., 1984; Schweinhart et al., 1993) kept this hope alive.

But today the findings concerning such model programs are no longer enough. In last year’s re-authorization of Head Start, Congress called for the program to be held accountable by a national evaluation, as well as local evaluations to be used for program improvement. The national evaluation, now
being planned and piloted by a group led by Westat, Inc., faces enormous challenges. The evaluation is to be nationally representative, involving 40 programs, and is to involve random assignment at each program site of children and families to Head Start or not. Perhaps its greatest challenge will be to persuade Head Start program staff and families that assignment to the group that does not get into Head Start is worthwhile, because of its contribution to scientific knowledge. Samuel Taylor Coleridge once said that the enjoyment of drama required the “willing suspension of disbelief.” Convincing program staff and families to willingly forego Head Start is asking them to engage in the willing suspension of their belief in the value of Head Start. Random assignment of people always has a political dimension. It works best when people genuinely do not know whether a program works or not, as was the case in the 1960s when the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study identified study participants. Whether it can be brought off with today’s Head Start programs, which are widely believed to contribute to young children’s development, only time will tell.

The Quest for Long-Term Program Effects

The second special feature of the preschool research tradition is its quest for long-term program effects. I must admit that we are as much responsible for this feature as anybody. But it began because of the preschool research tradition’s unique history. Everyone knows that early childhood stands at the beginning of life. This obvious fact led Sigmund Freud (Freud, Brill, 1938) to attribute special long-term power to early childhood experience – power which, unfortunately, empirical research could not verify. But researchers have long had evidence of the primacy of early childhood. Bloom (1964), for example, noticed that intellectual performance in early childhood was extremely volatile and then steadied off as children began school, and Hunt (1961) brought attention to the seminal work of Piaget on children’s development of intelligence (summarized in Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Such ideas led preschool research pioneers Susan Gray and David Weikart to focus on intellectual performance as the primary effect of their model preschool programs, and indeed, they found such an effect. But contrary to the expectations engendered by the work of Bloom and Hunt, the effect did not last more than a few years beyond the end of the preschool programs. Many, notably Arthur Jensen (1969), concluded that preschool program effects fade away with time. Enter the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies and its finding of preschool programs improving children’s grade placement.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study was the first to find the grade placement effect and the first to find various other long-term effects. Its quest for ever longer-term effects was always prefaced by the finding of meaningful effects at an earlier point in time – improved grade placement at age 10, substantially better achievement test scores at age 14, improved high school graduation rate and reduced antisocial behavior at age 19, improved earnings and half as many arrests at age 27. The random assignment design remains in place for the lifetimes of the study participants, leaving complete data collection at a time point as the remaining research design challenge.

The quest for long-term effects should not apply to every preschool program evaluation. Let me explain how and why I arrive at this conclusion. In addition to directing the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, I direct the evaluation of the Michigan School Readiness Program, the state’s statewide preschool program for 4-year-olds at risk of school failure. From its beginning, the Michigan Legislature and Department of Education dubbed this evaluation a longitudinal study. Indeed we have found program effects on grade retention through third grade and are continuing the evaluation through fourth grade this year. But my duality of roles has led me to draw an important distinction between two types of studies: evaluative research studies, which explore the limits of what model preschool programs can accomplish; and large-scale program evaluations, which look for immediate program effects known to be related to longer-term outcomes. To use a military analogy, the evaluative research studies scout out what is possible, while the large-scale program evaluations verify the effectiveness of the main body of troops. It is helpful to have a few evaluative research studies of large-scale programs, like that of Reynolds et al. (2001), to show that large-scale preschool programs can have the long-term effects established in smaller studies. But the standard is too stringent to be applied to every large-scale preschool program, particularly given the virtual
absence of experimental research on the effects of other levels of schooling, from kindergarten to college. Indeed, the national Head Start evaluation mentioned above does not plan to follow up children beyond the first couple years of elementary school, but even this is a more stringent standard than is applied to other educational programs.

By the same token, longitudinal evaluative research studies are absolutely critical to establishing the priority of outcomes for early childhood programs. President George W. Bush has said he wants to make Head Start a reading program. He would be well advised to examine the longitudinal research on what types of early childhood programs have contributed most to the long-term success of program participants in school and in life. To be sure, language and literacy are among the objectives of such programs. But children's social relations, motivation, and logical abilities have had equal prominence. It would be extremely unwise to trade off the proven promise of reduced crime and improved adult productivity for the sake of an unproven exclusive focus on children’s learning to read.

Why Does the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Resonate with People?

Good stories, including good scientific stories, resonate with people because they have dramatic conflict between opposing elements. The age-19 release of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study had dramatic conflict because it stood in opposition to the Reagan administration’s desire to cut back government funding for such programs and, indeed, contributed to the Reagan administration’s inclusion of Head Start among seven social safety-net programs. The enduring dramatic conflict of this study is between the desperation of poor people and the government about the seeming intractability of poverty and the study’s accumulating scientific findings to the contrary.

This dramatic conflict stands at the center of domestic policy development, whether it be in the U.S. the U.K., other developed nations, or developing nations. Progressives celebrate the triumphs of studies that find long-term program effects, while conservatives cast a critical, cynical eye on all efforts to improve the lot of the poor. But conservatives do have an important point. The only thing worse than offering no hope to the poor is offering them false hope. The persistent message of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study and other studies of model programs is that high-quality preschool programs can make life-changing contributions to the development of young children living in poverty. But the evidence suggests that only high-quality preschool programs can have such profound effects, and there are serious questions about whether existing preschool programs, especially large-scale ones, are up to this challenge.

Politics is the art of compromise. Almost a decade ago, when the Michigan Legislature was initiating what is now the Michigan School Readiness Program, I had the opportunity to testify for the key committee that was setting the level of spending per child. They had set the level at $2,000 per child, and I testified that a high-quality preschool program would cost at least $3,000 per child, back then. After my testimony, they set the level at $2,500 per child. By political standards, my testimony was successful. By research standards, it was a failure. Earlier in the development of this program, the State Board of Education said they did not want the money until they had developed standards for it. At another point, the Governor said he would veto the school funding bill if it did not include preschool funding. It is of such confrontations that real public policy is made. John Kennedy’s famous book Profiles in Courage (1956) celebrated the politicians who stood on principle in the face of such confrontations. To secure preschool programs of the quality needed, our nations need courageous politicians motivated by the realization that only high-quality preschool programs can secure the long-term effects that are truly possible.

Schweinhart (1988) presents a definition of quality in effective early childhood programs – a research-validated child development curriculum framework, one adult for no more than ten 3- or 4-year-olds, teachers well-trained in early childhood, effective curriculum training for teaching adults, supervisory and assessment support for the curriculum, involving parents as partners in the educational process, and attention to the non-educational needs of children and families. Two of these features make programs relatively expensive: The cost per child of paying teachers and assistant teachers professional wages and maintaining
one adult for no more than ten children makes these programs more costly per child than existing public school programs for older children. It is true that the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program and similar programs operated for only part of the day, which has led some of today’s preschool programs to offer double sessions, effectively doubling the staff-child ratio from one to ten to one to twenty. But widespread child care demand is making part-day preschool programs a luxury of the past for many.

Against this high cost per child, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study presents public benefits that are eventually seven times as great. Ironically, this form of self-interest resembles altruism, in two respects: it requires delay of gratification lasting at least two decades and it requires belief not only in the internal validity of the Perry study, but also in the generalizability of its findings to the policy-maker’s domain of responsibility, that is, to the children to be served and the programs offered today. The generalization to children to be served does not pose a problem: there is no lack of poor children in the world. The challenge is whether the preschool programs under consideration measure up to the quality of the High/Scope Perry Preschool program, particularly if these programs have resulted from compromises on cost per child and related features. When one is tempted to despair that large-scale public preschool programs can ever uniformly attain such a level of quality, ask yourself this question. Did people stop looking for gold during the California Gold Rush because many of them did not find it? Likewise, the promise of extraordinary human and financial return should motivate all of us — scientists, policymakers, and citizens — to keep striving to provide preschool programs of high quality to all young children living in poverty. To do any less is to shortchange the next generation and in so doing, to shortchange ourselves.

**References**


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