

Research Update

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The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) What are We Learning about Program Quality and Child Development?

by Ruth Hubbell McKey

(The author represents the FACES study research team)

Every day Head Start staff and parents see the benefits of Head Start to young children; however, policymakers and administrators need systematic evidence of Head Start's value. They also want objective evaluations of the quality of Head Start services. This need for accountability has been addressed by Head Start in recent years through the development of the Head Start Program Performance Measures and research on the quality and effects of Head Start. At the center of this research initiative is the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES).

Begun in 1997, FACES is a way to look at the program performance of Head Start and its children over time. It began with a stratified national probability sample of 40 programs and 3,200 children who were followed from the time they entered Head Start at ages 3 or 4 through first grade. In 2000, a second group of 43 different programs and 2,800 children was selected for study.

FACES is a comprehensive study that examines child development, classroom quality, parent perceptions and experiences, and staff characteristics, knowledge, and opinions. A comprehensive child assessment was developed to measure children's skills in emergent literacy, numeracy and

language, general cognitive skills, gross and fine motor skills, social behavior, emotional well-being, and physical health. While children are assessed directly on a range of developmental abilities, parent and teacher ratings of children's abilities are also obtained to provide a more well-rounded perspective of the children.

Because data are now available on the 1997 and the 2000 groups of children, we can look at how the program and children are changing over time. Is the quality of Head Start improving? Are children learning more now than just a few years ago? Are they progressing in certain areas of development but not in others?

Head Start classroom quality

We examined the quality of Head Start classrooms using several standardized measures of quality that are consistent with the Head Start Program Performance Standards. They include the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) developed by Harms, Clifford, and Cryer (the original ECERS was used in 1997, and the revised version in 2000), the scheduling and learning environment scales of the Assessment Profile (developed by Abbott-Shim and Sibley), the Arnett Scale of Caregiver Behavior (by Arnett), and data on adult-child ratio

and class size. In both 1997 and 2000, the average Head Start classroom scored in the "good" range. Indeed over 70 percent of classrooms studied scored in the "good" or "excellent" range and very few in the "minimal" range. We believe this indicates that the Head Start Program Performance Standards promote the establishment of good classrooms and eliminate inferior classrooms, even though there is still room for improvement.

Program and teacher characteristics relating to classroom quality: Classroom quality appears to be affected by a variety of interacting factors including the characteristics of the families served, teacher qualifications and experience, and teachers' knowledge of best practices to promote learning in early childhood.

Curricula: 70 percent of teachers used a single, specific curriculum while just over 20 percent used a combination. The majority used The Creative Curriculum by Teaching Strategies Inc. (39 percent) or the High/Scope curriculum (20 percent), but 41 percent used another curriculum. Nearly 60 percent of teachers received training in their curriculum from their own programs, with 14 percent receiving it from the

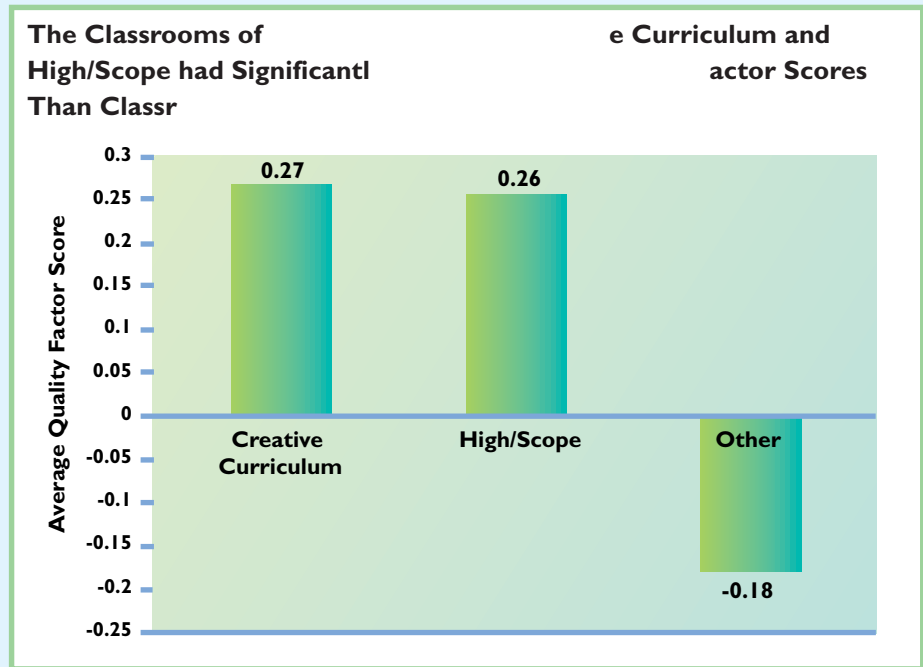
curricula developers, 10 percent from a Head Start Quality Improvement Center, and the remainder from other sources. More than 90 percent of teachers liked their curriculum for a variety of reasons including that it covered multiple domains, was easy to use and adapt, involved parents, provided room for teacher creativity, and had adequate learning materials.

Relationship of curriculum to classroom quality: Classrooms that used The Creative Curriculum or the High/Scope curriculum had significantly higher average quality factor scores than programs that used other curricula. (The average quality factor score is a combination of scores from the ECERS-R and the Assessment Profile.) Classrooms that used these two curricula also had significantly higher ECERS language scores. (See graph.)

Child outcomes

Child outcomes were measured through direct assessment, observation, and parent and teacher ratings. Some key findings and differences between the 1997 and 2000 groups are presented below.

Vocabulary: A major language skill assessed by FACES is the children's receptive vocabulary — their ability to understand increasingly varied and complex words. At the beginning of their Head Start year, FACES children scored about 85, or about 15 points below the average for all preschool children (including their more socio-economically advantaged peers). They gained about 4 points against these averages (norms) over the course of the year, which means that they progressed



at least as well as the “typical” preschool child. Their gains were about the same in 1997 as in 2000.

Letter Recognition: Another very important literacy skill assessed by FACES is letter recognition. With Congress now mandating that children should know at least 10 letters of the alphabet by the time they leave Head Start, this measure has taken on increased significance. In FACES 2000, children showed greater gains in letter recognition than the children showed in 1997. In 2000 the children learned the equivalent of 5 additional letters in Head Start and knew an average of 8.9 letters at the end of the program year. In 1997 they learned the equivalent of 4 additional letters and knew an average of only 7.2 letters at the end of the year.

Summaries of performance on other skills

Math: Children showed comparable standard score gains on a measure of early math skills in FACES 2000 and FACES 1997, although the children started and ended higher in 2000.

minority children began the program

considerably below those of English-speaking Head Start children. They made greater vocabulary gains in English in Head Start than the English-speakers. However, they still finished the year with English vocabulary skills that were lower than their English-speaking peers. Their letter recognition skills were roughly comparable in English and Spanish, but they showed no gains compared to national averages over the year.

Implication for Head Start programs

- Programs should continue to improve the quality of their classrooms through attention to the facilities, equipment and supplies, educational activities, schedule, and interaction with children. The Head Start Program Performance Standards, PRISM classroom observation instruments, research instruments such as the ECERS, and the NAEYC Accreditation guidelines are all ➡

Research Update

possible sources of guidance. Because teachers' understanding of best practices to promote learning in early childhood is central to classroom quality, it is important that these practices are included in staff training.

- Programs should stress educational activities that promote children's development of increasingly varied and complex vocabularies. Vocabulary has been shown to predict strongly children's later general knowledge and comprehension skills. Reading to children in small groups with the promotion of discussion about stories, conversations with children, word games, and exposure to an increasingly wide variety of experiences can help to develop vocabulary. Encouraging parents to read to children daily using an interactive style is also important.
- While Head Start children are close to the Congressional mandate for learning letters, they are still below national averages for this skill. There is strong research evidence that letter knowledge is one of the best predictors of reading success in school, so it is especially important that Head

Start children begin school with strong skills in this area. Therefore, programs should provide print-rich environments for children and introduce them to specific letters in creative and interesting ways that are integrated into the overall program curriculum.

- Programs should focus on activities to enhance math skills, including the introduction of such concepts as classification of similar objects, counting, one-to-one correspondence in counting, simple addition and subtraction activities, patterns, and the concepts of *more* and *less*.
- With the ballooning number of children in Head Start who speak languages other than English, programs should focus on enhancing these children's English language skills. Vocabulary acquisition activities such as those described above are especially important.
- The use of a conceptually integrated curriculum based on sound principles of early learning and development will help programs enhance both the overall quality and language quality of their classrooms.

As we continue to explore the changes in Head Start programs and children from 1997 to 2000 and beyond, we will be able to provide program staff, parents, administrators, and policymakers with additional insight into the quality of programs and changes that are needed to enhance that quality. We will also obtain additional information about the development of children in key domains and the progress that is being made over time to enhance those skills even further so that children will leave Head Start ready to learn and succeed in school. **C&F**

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