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Evolution of Head Start Goals

Parent Involvement, Child Development, and Dual-Generation Family Approaches

Overview

The goals and purpose of Head Start have evolved over its 50-year lifetime and have traditionally focused on promoting general child wellbeing and development within the context of parents and families who have limited access to economic resources, education and support services. While the program brings attention to both parents and children, the extent to which each is prioritized in terms of service delivery has varied over time. Parental employment was initially a key focus of the program, but this emphasis diminished over time. Simultaneously, Head Start's focus on children's education and school readiness has become more pronounced over the years, particularly in the past two decades. Nevertheless, Head Start continues to promote and require parent involvement and family engagement activities as part of its 'whole child' approach to child development. Recently, parental employment has been drawn back into the spotlight as more attention is paid to dual generation approaches in Head Start. These approaches – which provide enhanced education and employment services for parents alongside the regular Head Start services for children – may play an important role in the reduction of inequities between higher- and lower-income families and improve child development. Thus, continuing to strengthen parental employment services could be an important equity strategy for Head Start.

Parent involvement and engagement

Head Start was initially created in 1964 by two major stakeholder groups with very different visions of program design. The **Head Start Planning Committee**, composed of child development experts, envisioned an initial small scale, comprehensive, high-quality child development program for low-income children staffed by highly qualified teachers.

The other stakeholder group, called the **Community Action Program (CAP)**, was the War on Poverty-authorized program under which Head Start was legislatively housed. The CAP vision focused on developing a large-scale program targeting family poverty alleviation and community empowerment. Although the administrators of CAP acknowledged the importance of trained teachers, a shortage of teachers to staff the large number of new programs required the use of paraprofessionals and volunteers.¹

This philosophical divide manifested itself clearly in a debate around parent participation in the early years of the program. Both groups considered parental participation in the program to be a key aspect of Head Start, but for different reasons.

The **Head Start Planning Committee** advocated for significant parent engagement so as to foster strong parent-child relationships, which are important to healthy child development.² This recommendation was also based on research that stressed the importance of parent involvement in the education and healthy development of children with special needs.

CAP leaders ardently supported parental involvement in Head Start as paid administrators, teachers and staff members, with the idea that employing parents and community members close to their children would empower poor families and communities and benefit their children economically.

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These two visions of the program – one as a child development and education program, the other as a job creator and community empowerment program – proved incompatible, as experts viewed that informally-trained parent educators could not achieve the best educational results.³ The tension between these philosophies created internal struggles within Head Start during the late 1960s, but over time child development and school readiness priorities prevailed.

Today there are no provisions for paid parental employment in Head Start, although unpaid parental involvement is still woven into many aspects of the program. Head Start defines **parent involvement** as “parent participation in the systems and activities of Head Start” such as policy councils and parent meetings.⁴ For example, the Head Start Program Performance Standards require grantees to involve parents in curriculum development, volunteer opportunities, program governance (including policy-making and operations), and as program observers and visitors.⁵

However, this parental involvement is viewed as just one aspect of a broader agenda of **family engagement**, which promotes full family and parental investment in their child’s development by fostering “goal-directed relationships between staff and families that are mutual, culturally responsive, and that support what is best for children and families both individually and collectively.”⁶ Family engagement is considered central to healthy child development and is encouraged in any type of contact between programs and caregivers, whether during home visits, parent meetings, or at pick-up and drop-off times.⁷ The *Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework* (PRCE Framework) developed by the Office of Head Start (OHS) and the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE) outlines seven family engagement outcomes that should help children become ready for school and sustain learning over time.⁸ The family engagement goals highlight the shift in Head Start’s parental participation strategy from parent-focused to child development-focused.

Family engagement goals and activities are aligned with an increasing interest in implementing **dual-generation approach** to service delivery in Head Start. A dual generation approach targets services for parents alongside the regular Head Start services for children. For example, from 2004 to 2006, the Enhanced Early Head Start program in Kansas and Missouri aimed to improve parents’ employment, education and self-sufficiency through trainings, partnerships with welfare agencies and local programs, and the hiring of on-site ‘self-sufficiency staff’.⁹ Recently, a 2013 Request for Proposals calls for evaluation of “promising dual-generation approaches, which combine intensive, high-quality, child-focused programs with intensive, high-quality, adult-focused services to support both parent well-being and children’s school readiness, within the context of Head Start.”¹⁰ Importantly, this service-oriented approach differs from the 1960s effort to employ parents in Head Start in that it treats parent employment as a supplement to Head Start’s normal child development activities, rather than as a core function of the program. Head Start remains a child development-focused program. However, these dual generation approaches may represent renewed interest in parent employment and may potentially play an important role in the reduction of inequities between higher- and lower-income families and children.

Child development

Like its parental involvement and family engagement objectives, Head Start’s child development goals have evolved over the course of the program’s history. Between 1966 and 1996, Head Start’s official legislative goals regarding child developmental were to promote general child wellbeing and development that would allow children to achieve their “full potential.” This final child outcome – achievement of “full potential” – was neither defined nor specifically measured. No further elaboration was provided until 1975, with the creation of the Head Start Program Performance Standards which offered an alternative goal: improving low-income children’s “social competence.” The standards defined “social

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competence” as:

...“the child’s everyday effectiveness in dealing with both present environment and later responsibilities in school and life. Social competence takes into account the interrelatedness of cognitive and intellectual development, physical and mental health, nutritional needs, and other factors that enable a child to function optimally.”¹¹

Both “full potential” and “social competence” reflected a concern with the child’s ability to navigate and flourish in all aspects of life, not solely in school. These terms embody Head Start’s “whole child” approach, and the deep emphasis it places on child physical, emotional and developmental health, in addition to academic ability. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of both goals made them difficult to measure and assess.¹²

It was not until 1998 when legislators refocused Head Start’s goals that the term “school readiness” was introduced, replacing “full potential” and “social competence” as the major end objective. School readiness is now the official primary goal of Head Start, placing greater emphasis on the educational functions of the program. It is important to note that although Head Start’s official goals did not specify a heavy academic emphasis for most of the program’s existence, the program has often been touted or perceived as having a primary focus on cognitive outcomes.¹³ It is essential to consider the multifaceted and changing nature of Head Start’s goals when evaluating the program’s success. The introduction of school readiness into the legislation may help clarify Head Start’s purpose, although the term “school readiness” also has definitional and measurement issues.

Sources & notes:

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- ² Zigler, E. & Styfco, S.J. (2010). *The hidden history of Head Start*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2012). *Family engagement as parent involvement 2.0: Understanding the difference in terms & concepts*. Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/revise-parent-engagement-as-pi.pdf>.
- ⁵ Program Performance Standards for the Operation of Head Start Programs by Grantees and Delegate Agencies Program governance, 45 CFR § 1304.50 (2007). Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/Head%20Start%20Requirements/1304/1304.50%20Program%20governance..htm>.
- ⁶ National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2012). *Family engagement as parent involvement 2.0: Understanding the difference in terms & concepts*. Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/revise-parent-engagement-as-pi.pdf>.
- ⁷ Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/Family%20and%20Community%20Partnerships/Parent,%20Family,%20and%20Community%20Engagement%20Framework%20Webcast%20Series/FrequentlyAsked.htm>.
- ⁸ National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. (2011). *Bringing the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework to your program: Beginning a self-assessment* (Version 1). Office of Head Start. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/ncpfce-assessment-101411.pdf>.
- ⁹ Hseuh, J. & Farrell, M. (2012). *Enhanced Early Head Start with Employment Services*. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/enhanced_early_head_start_employment_fr.pdf.
- ¹⁰ *Head Start university partnerships: Dual-generation approaches*. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Resources. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/grants/open/foa/files/HHS-2013-ACF-OPRE-YR-0634_0.pdf.
- ¹¹ Program performance standards for operation of Head Start programs by grantees and delegate agencies, Head Start program goals, 45 CFR § 1307.1-3 (1975).
- ¹² Zigler, op. cit.
- ¹³ Zigler, op. cit.