

Head Start Programs: Are They Beneficial to Low-Income, African American Children?

An Ethnographic Analysis of School Readiness



Theola Maxon (maxon2@illinois.edu), Anita Oladunni (oladunni2@illinois.edu), & Robin L. Jarrett, Ph.D.
Department of Human Development and Family Studies

Introduction

Research indicates that low-income, African-American children are disproportionately at risk for not being ready for kindergarten. Studies show that children perform better in kindergarten when they obtain quality preparation in a Head Start Program. However, the long term effectiveness of these programs on low-income, African American children's academic abilities is currently being debated. Preliminary findings derived from our qualitative interviews with 10 African American mothers revealed the following three categories: 1) children who's before and after kindergarten preparedness scores increased, 2) children who's before and after kindergarten preparedness scores remained the same, and 3) children who's before and after kindergarten preparedness scores decreased. Based on both of the children's preparedness scores, Head Start programs was successful in preparing the children for kindergarten.

Our Working Definitions

School Readiness: "a multidimensional concept that considers behavioral and cognitive aspects of the child's development as well as the child's adaptation to the classroom" (Parker et al., 1999)

Head Start: A federally funded program that is aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty by targeting children ages 3-5. Through comprehensive emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological programs, Head Start is able to be responsive to low-income communities and families.

Methods

We used an interpretive qualitative approach, guided by resiliency theory, to explore the lives of ten families from an impoverished Midwestern neighborhood in an effort to better understand how their head start program was preparing their children for the transition to kindergarten.

Two in-depth interviews: One conducted with mothers while their child was enrolled in pre-kindergarten, and one following their child's completion of kindergarten. Within the interviews, the parents rated their child's preparedness before and after kindergarten.

Preliminary Findings

Five children had an increase in their school readiness scores, one child had a decrease in their school readiness score, and four children maintained consistent school readiness scores.

During the interviews, mothers were asked to describe the scores they gave their child

"He knows well how to say what's on his mind. So I think that's very important. He knows how to write. He knows his basic math. He know a little bit of addition. He knows a little bit of reading. He understands the shapes. Different things in the science *practice*, different things in the history practice as far as geography and time of events. And he understands that. And they're doin all that in kindergarten." - Crystal, 33

"And the reason is she went in .She knew what to do. She was gettin gettin 'all the work done. She understood everything that her teacher gave her. Spellin tests, she come home wit '10 spellin words they had to write. And then they had to write a complete sentence. Choose one spellin word, write a complete sentence. She knew how to use her punctuation. She understood to capitalize the beginnin 'of the sentence.'" - LaShawn, 28

"Because she knew some of the things going into kindergarten, like how to count, but she really wasn't prepared for that school with no naps and just playing when they want to play, and story time on the carpet. She wasn't prepared." -Diamond, 24

Overall, all of the mothers noted that the Head Start programs did help their child in terms of readiness for kindergarten. During the follow-up interview, when asked why they changed their score or kept it the same, mothers usually attributed that to some other factor (ex: misbehavior, acclimating to a structured class, lack of challenge in work assigned, etc.)



Participants	Before Kindergarten Preparedness Scores	After Kindergarten Preparedness Scores
Child #1	7	9
Child #2	5	10
Child #3	8	8
Child #4	8	8
Child #5	10	10
Child #6	7	10
Child #7	5	4
Child #8	10	10
Child #9	7	7
Child #10	7.5	10
Child #11	8	8
Child #12	8	9

Discussion

Although our data leads us to believe that the Head Start programs are fulfilling their purpose, there are still factors affecting the early education experience of low income African-American children. Contributing factors like the parent's early education experience, parental involvement in school readiness, and family dynamics all play a role in school readiness. Also regarding school readiness, a majority of the mother's rated their child(ren)'s overall kindergarten performance with scores of 6 and above. Attributing their child(ren)'s performance to the things that they already knew and things that Head Start taught their child(ren).



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