

# Head Start

## A Bridge From Past to Future

Blythe S.F. Hinitz

HEAD START WAS BUILT ON A STRONG BASE OF civil rights advocacy and a long history of private and government-funded US early childhood education programs. At the 50th anniversaries of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964, it is fitting that we remember that Head Start was born of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty in the middle of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

At the time of Head Start's creation, 10 years had already passed since the Supreme Court's momentous *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others were helping the United States focus on the needs of under-represented groups. President Johnson announced the creation of Head Start in a special message to Congress on January 12, 1965, in which he focused on the expansion of "preschool program[s] in order to reach disadvantaged children early" (Osborn 1991). Lady Bird Johnson launched her role as a national spokeswoman for the Head Start program with a tea in the Rose Garden, attended by members of the Head Start planning committee. The gathering, which was covered on newspaper society pages, gave the program "an aura of respectability" (Kuntz 1998, 8-9).

### Varying views on Head Start

Views varied on what kind of program Head Start should be. It was widely believed at the time that "poverty and welfare dependencies are transmitted intergenerationally [because] . . . education, independence, ambition, [and] concern for the future are not reinforced during a childhood spent in poverty and dependence on welfare" (Washington & Bailey 1995, 21). Those who held this view believed that since parents were accountable for their children's condition, anti-poverty programs—including Head Start—should either remove children from the influence of parents who were not meeting their needs or work to improve the parents for the benefit of the children. This attitude led to the cultural deprivation theory, which "suggested that the poor needed to be educated, to have opportunities to learn the values embraced by middle-class America and that, if introduced to these ideas—most important to the

work ethic—the poor would straighten up and act like real Americans" (Kuntz 1998, 4).

Others, believing that parents should personally benefit from a program and that community buy-in was important, suggested a combination of parent education and participation in decision making. Those espousing the least supported view—that poverty is a systemic issue—proposed that parents should be involved in actual program governance.

Although the EOA legislation authorized Community Action Programs (CAPs) to assist local communities in establishing and administering their own antipoverty efforts, some local governments opposed the proposed placement of administrative control and resources in the hands of poor people and refused to apply for program grants. In an effort to make the CAP more palatable to local officials, while using what would have been an embarrassing budget surplus, the Head Start project was born (Zigler & Styfco 1996, 133).

From a feminist history perspective, Greenberg (1998) wrote,

Probably the many men involved in the original planning of Head Start were so exhilarated by the heady thrill of inclusion in such an exciting and important project that they neglected to notice the relevant pioneering work in early education, social work, child health, and parent education that women had been thoughtfully engaged in—and teaching and writing about—for several generations. (63)

Greenberg points out that although the wives and mothers of some of these men were kindergarten and nursery school teachers, and most of their children had attended early education programs, "the several dozen men at the head of Head Start never appeared to realize that there was an early childhood profession, with leaders, usually female, of its own" (63).

### Early education and social justice

From its inception Head Start had a dual role. It would provide comprehensive health, nutrition, and education services for young children, including early identification of physical and mental health problems and medical, dental, and psychological services. An overarching goal of the program was enhancing social competence

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Muscle development	Activity and materials	Description
Whole arm	<b>Under-the-Table Art</b> Large sheet of drawing paper, tape, and crayons or chalk	Tape the paper to the underside of a table. Children lie on their backs under the table, extend the arm with crayon or chalk in hand, and draw on the paper.
	<b>Ribbons and Rings</b> Set of plastic bracelets and 12 inches of colored ribbon for each bracelet	Attach a ribbon to each bracelet using a simple slip-knot. Play music. Children wear or hold their bracelets and use their bracelet arms to make big circles, wave the ribbons high and low, and perform other creative movements.
	<b>Stir It Up!</b> Large pot, long wooden spoon, and pebbles	Put the dry ingredients and the spoon in the pot, and place it in the dramatic play area. Children stir the “soup” using a large circular arm motion.
Whole hand	<b>Sponge Squeeze</b> Small sponge, divided food dish, and water	Fill one side of the dish with water. Children transfer the water from side to side by dipping and squeezing the sponge.
	<b>Lid Match</b> Two baskets and a collection of plastic containers with matching lids (spice jars, margarine tubs, yogurt cups, shampoo containers, hand cream jars, and such)	Sort the containers and lids into separate baskets. Children match and attach the lids to the right containers.
	<b>Cornmeal Sifting</b> Crank-style sifter, large bowl, and fine sand	Place the empty sifter in the bowl. Children use two hands to pour the sand into the sifter, then turn the crank handle to sift the sand into the bowl.

Adapted with permission from Nell R. Carvell, Language Enrichment Activities Program (LEAP), vol. 1 (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University, 2006).

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(now termed *social and emotional competence*), which included “the child’s everyday effectiveness in dealing with his environment and later responsibilities in school and life” (Osborn 1991, 152).

But Head Start wasn’t only about early education; as a CAP, the program was envisioned as a vehicle to give families with low incomes a voice, and for doing things *with* them rather than *to* them. Osborn’s concept of the child development center, which emphasized all resources—family, community, and professional—that could contribute to children’s development, was adopted as a model.

### Parent involvement

To help achieve the goal of giving families a voice, Head Start legislation called for the “maximum feasible participation” of parents. Programs would form Parent Policy Councils. Parents on the councils would have executive responsibilities, including engagement in planning the center environment and curriculum, obtaining jobs as classroom assistants, participating in the hiring process, and learning empowerment strategies to become catalysts for community action efforts. In practice, however, there was a dichotomy of implementation of the parent involvement initiative. In the initial stages of the project, some Head Start programs provided for community control. Parents in these programs handled funding for training, supervisory staff, monitoring, and evaluation. Parents participated equally with professionals in decision making. In the majority of programs, however, the emphasis was on parent *involvement*, which meant parents were participants on the perimeter rather than at the core.

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In 1975 the standards for parent involvement were codified into the national Head Start Performance Standards, Section 70.2, which mandated that parents of children in the program constitute a majority on the policy board and described the ways in which that board must have input and decision-making power in different areas of operation.

### About the Author

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### Author’s Note

This column is dedicated to the work and spirit of friend and colleague Polly Greenberg (1932–2013), who chronicled the history of Head Start as a social justice advocate, a feminist, and an early childhood educator.

## The Author’s Reflections on the First Head Start Programs

Blythe S.F. Hinitz taught in one of the first Head Start programs in New York City, in Ocean Hill–Brownsville. Teachers attended preparatory lectures and training activities in June 1965 at Teachers College, Columbia University. The New York City Board of Education administered the Head Start summer program and provided public school classrooms, supplies, and equipment for teachers and children. Among the materials were Gotkin matrix boards, Language Lotto, and some of the first trade books about African American children (including *The Snowy Day*, by Ezra Jack Keats). The certified teachers in the program completed a variety of observations and evaluations, which presumably became part of the initial assessments of the nationwide project. As a member of the board of a Community Action Program in another state for more than 25 years, Blythe observed some of the occurrences described in this column.

These standards set Head Start apart from other social service programs and the public schools by providing for specific, active roles for families in such areas as curriculum, finance, staff hiring and firing, and policy. “These parent roles, though perhaps without as radical a potential as community control could have had, do give parents significant official control of programs” (Ellsworth & Ames 1998, xiii).

### Serving diverse populations

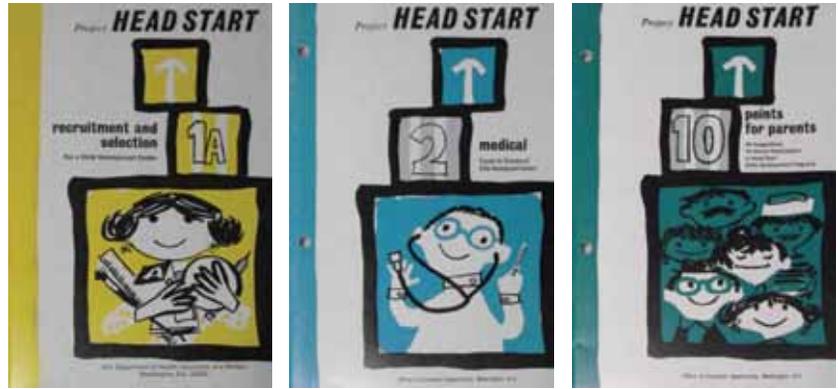
In addition to giving parents more prominent roles in their children’s education and in their community, Head Start has been “seen as a special opportunity for our minority groups” (Hymes & Osborn 1979, 33). Head Start programs for children from migrant families (beginning in 1969) and children living on federal Native American reservations meet some of the specialized needs of these children and families. The emphasis on respect for, and serving the needs of, diverse populations in communities was underscored by Dr. Julius B. Richmond, Head Start’s first project director, in his 1991 address to Head Start’s First National Research Conference: “We can no longer afford to neglect groups that will become even larger segments of our population. This bespeaks the need to have many approaches, both quantitative and qualitative, covering diverse domains” (Zigler et al. 1992, 23).

### Head Start’s early days

Initially a summer-only program, Head Start served 562,000 children in 2,500 centers across the United States during its first summer. There were 41,000 teachers (including the author), 46,000 teaching assistants (mothers

who were hired to assist the teaching staff), 256,000 volunteers (including Lady Bird Johnson and her daughter, and many congressional wives), and 170 early childhood consultants. Thanks to the efforts of Keith Osborn and James Hymes, classes had a favorable adult-child ratio: each class consisted of 15 children, one teacher, one paid aide, and at least one volunteer. Training materials included the Rainbow Series of booklets and pamphlets, along with a phonograph record and 20 films developed by Dr. Joseph L. Stone of Vassar College and Dr. Jeannette Galambos Stone of Sarah Lawrence College. Head Start was offered as a nine-month, half-day program beginning in 1966 (Zigler, Styfco, & Gilman 1993).

Research on results of the Head Start program has been mixed. The scathing 1969 Westinghouse report (Westinghouse Learning Corporation & Ohio University 1969); the Jensen article (1969), which stated that “compensatory education has been tried, and it apparently has failed” (2); and Bronfenbrenner’s 1974 report on the fade-out hypothesis all caused much concern, but



such reports also triggered major revisions to the Head Start program. Research conducted by Irving Lazar and the Cornell Consortium, and studies done in Ypsilanti, Michigan; Syracuse, New York; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, provided more supportive data (see Washington & Bailey 1995).

### Professional development

The Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential—a major professional development component of Head Start created in 1972 to meet the need for qualified child care staff—now extends to early childhood programs beyond Head Start. The CDA, a national certification, celebrated its 40th year by revising its assessment model to take advantage of recent technological innovations. (For information about the CDA and technology, visit the Council for Professional Recognition website at [www.cdacouncil.org](http://www.cdacouncil.org).) The CDA is based on a set of core competencies: providing safe and healthy learning environments, advancing children’s physical and intellectual competence, supporting children’s social and emotional health, building positive relationships with families, responding to the needs of program participants, and maintaining professionalism (Council for Professional Recognition 2013).

### The strong foundation stands

Head Start today retains in practice and philosophy many ties to its roots. It remains a comprehensive health, nutrition, and education program addressing the needs of a diverse group of young children with differing abilities. The original goal of enhancing children’s social competence also remains important. Despite the fact that “maximum feasible participation” of parents has more often meant limited parent involvement rather than active participation in decision making, governance, and establishing and administering their own antipoverty efforts, Head Start has maintained its commitment to giving families with low incomes a voice, as mandated in the Head Start Program Performance Standards. As Head Start nears its golden anniversary, it continues to build on its strong early education and social justice foundation.

## Theoretical and Research Influences on Head Start

There is general agreement that Sargent Shriver, director of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) created under the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA), his staff, and the consultants they engaged were influenced by the following theories and writings in creating Project Head Start:

- Sigmund Freud’s emphasis on the importance of the early years
- Beth Wellman’s argument that IQ is not a fixed element
- Jean Piaget’s genetic epistemological studies
- Benjamin Bloom’s and J. McVicker Hunt’s writings
- John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society*
- Michael Harrington’s *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*
- Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (the Moynihan Report)

These theories and writings still impact Head Start today. In addition, research carried out during the early stages of the program by Bettye Caldwell, Blanche Persky, Susan Gray, Cynthia and Martin Deutsch, and David Weikart and the Perry Preschool Project staff led to program models in use across the country today.

## Head Start Planning Committee and Related Programs

Julius B. Richmond, MD, was Head Start's first project director. The planning committee was formed in 1964. The early childhood education field was represented by John H. Niemeier, D. Keith Osborn—who became the project educational director—and James L. Hymes Jr. Other committee members included Urie Bronfenbrenner, Mamie Clark, Jacqueline Wexler, and Edward Zigler, who later became the first director of the federal Office of Child Development.

**Project Follow-Through** (1966 to 1996) was an intervention program for Head Start graduates from kindergarten through the third grade. Its aim was to enable children to maintain the gains made in Head Start and establish continuity between the children's preschool education and later schooling. It initially included comprehensive health, social, mental health, nutrition, and other support services similar to those offered in Head Start and retained an emphasis on parent involvement. The planning committee, chaired by Gordon Klopff of Bank Street College of Education, included Zigler and Bronfenbrenner from the original Head Start planning committee. Robert Egbert, the first Follow-Through director, established a pilot program of planned variation and sponsored curriculum models similar to that of Head Start. When the Office of Economic Opportunity delegated Follow-Through to the US Office of Education, funding cuts drastically reduced the comprehensive services provided and eventually forced the program to close.

Head Start generated several related programs that address the needs of a variety of populations. In 1967 the first of 33 **Parent and Child Centers** (PCCs) opened, offering supportive services and parent education to families and children from birth to Head Start entry. PCCs were intended as preventive programs to protect young children from physiological trauma, leading to a reduction in developmental disturbances.

Beginning in 1972, **Home Start** provided rural and isolated families access to health, education, and social services through home visitors. These visitors were usually community residents who had participated in training in child development principles and Head Start's goals. An advantage of the home-based program was that siblings of the child for whom the services were intended also benefited. Some Head Start and related programs continue to employ home visitors today.

**Early Head Start** began in 1998 under the sponsorship of the Advisory Committee on Services for Families With Infants and Toddlers, established by Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala. It is currently operated by the Office of Head Start, with training and technical assistance provided by the Early Head Start Resource Center at Zero to Three.

For more information about Head Start and related programs, see Lascarides & Hinitz 2011, 401–59.

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