

# Sociology of Education: An A-to-Z Guide

## Head Start

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Project Head Start is a national compensatory education program serving economically disadvantaged children from ages 3 to 5. The mission of Head Start is to promote school readiness through education, health, nutrition, and social services. Parental and community involvement are considered key aspects in a comprehensive approach. Students attend preschool at Head Start centers throughout the United States and its territories. Launched in 1965 as an eight-week summer program, Head Start now includes year-round, full-day services.

**[p. 349 ↓ ]** Newly sworn in President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the War on Poverty. Although many educational and anti-poverty initiatives were discussed under the Kennedy administration, President Johnson began the large-scale effort to leverage government in the fight against poverty. Poverty was considered a generational disease, and the Johnson administration devised programs that it hoped would alleviate its symptoms, cure it, and prevent it from reappearing. To that end, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was passed and signed into law. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) was hence created, and R. Sargent Shriver, husband of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, was chosen to head it. New initiatives included job programs, as well as education and training for those with low literacy and/or low job skills. Partly because of evolving understandings about childhood development, President Johnson also called for a preschool initiative: Head Start. Of 30 million Americans living in poverty, half were children. Cultural gaps and impoverished environments accounted for discrepancies in IQ, and were thought to handicap children from future success. Child development theorists argued that early intervention, before age 5, could reduce negative affects and create opportunity for positive change.

Robert E. Cooke, a professor of pediatrics at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, headed the OEO's interdisciplinary Head Start Planning Committee. Other members specialized in pediatrics, child development, retardation, and early childhood education. From the president's announcement in January 1965, the Cooke Committee had a few months to devise, advertise, and launch Head Start that summer. There were internal debates about the size and scope of the program. Academics and social scientists on the committee suggested that the launch should include 25,000 students in a pilot program. It was more prudent, they argued, to start small, evaluate, make

improvements, and scale up. Shriver disagreed with this tact, believing that a small program was easy to dismiss and cut, and that political expediency dictated a massive and immediate launch.

Initial decisions sometimes sacrificed quality, and made later changes difficult. For one, rushed calculations suggested that the summer program could be run for \$180 per child; experts thought that a reasonable allocation was \$1,000 per child. That low number guaranteed low salaries for Head Start teachers. Later critiques of the program included the lack of qualified teachers, who were hard to recruit with little pay. Centers employed low-paid workers and volunteers—some who were low literate. Experts later noted that this was not the high-quality early intervention that could help ameliorate the effects of poverty, although it was beneficial to employ parents and enlist community support. Additionally, the goals for the program were vague. Social competence and school readiness were not clear and measureable objectives. Was the program an educational one or not? What did it really mean to be ready for school? Furthermore, the lack of a national curriculum allowed local centers to develop the programs that most suited their populations, but this made it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the program as a whole. Eventually, a longitudinal study, the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), was implemented.

## Immediate Success

Project Head Start was immediately declared a success, especially with respect to noncognitive domains. Moreover, early findings revealed that students also experienced cognitive gains. Unfortunately, cognitive gains were not sustained over time. Defenders said that the results were caused by the brevity of the summer program, and that more lasting gains would occur once students enrolled in the year-round program, to be launched in 1966. Insiders complained that evaluations defaulted to cognitive gains, yet the program was never envisioned as a purely, or even mostly, educational one. School readiness, they felt, encompassed much more than IQ.

Almost immediately after the launch of the first summer program, a year-round program was announced. The Head Start program has been funded continuously, although not without controversy, since 1965. Head Start funding surpassed the \$1 billion mark for

the first time in 1985. By 2009, the appropriation had grown to over \$7 billion. A portion of the Head Start budget is designated for American Indian-Alaska Natives, and migrant and seasonal programs. In the 1990s, Head Start was funded for expansion and quality improvements. Reauthorization packages also included revised program standards, with a more specific focus on school readiness and literacy. Head Start has also added provisions for children with disabilities, as well as bilingual and bicultural programs. Recent statistics highlight the diversity of enrollment: 40 percent of enrollees are white, 30 percent are black, and 35 percent are Latino. A large majority of students [p. 350 ↓ ] are ages 3 and 4. The current average cost per child is \$7,600. Over 27 million children have been served since the Head Start program began in 1965.

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See Also:

#### Further Readings

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