

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study and the Man Who Began It

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Most researchers don't wake up and say, "Today I'll begin that 40-year study I've been thinking about!" Neither did David Weikart. But although he didn't consciously plan to conduct a long-term study of the effects of a high-quality preschool program on children living in poverty, that is what happened. What began as a small-scale project turned into one of the most influential and well-regarded research studies and educational models in the world of early childhood. With the recent release of the age-40 results of this study and the marking of the first anniversary of Weikart's death, we want to share the story that put Weikart and the High/Scope Curriculum on the map—the story of the High/Scope Perry Preschool study.

The Seeds of the Perry Preschool Study

Throughout his long professional career, David Weikart was interested in changing the practice of education to enable children and youth—especially those who were economically disadvantaged—to attain greater personal, social, and economic success. As school psychologist and director of special services in the Ypsilanti (Michigan) School District in the 1950s, Weikart was frustrated with the lack of options for failing students and the prevailing attitude among school officials that children from impoverished backgrounds were, well, beyond help academically. "I was told that everything possible was already being done; the test scores just represented the way children were," he said. "What could you expect? Their ability was what they were born with."

With his idea for reform of the elementary school curriculum thus dismissed, Weikart and a handful of other reform-minded individuals in the school district came up with a plan for intervention at the preschool level. It seemed a promising way to help children disadvantaged by poverty improve their intellectual and academic capabilities and start their formal schooling on a

par with other children. In addition, such a plan posed no threat to existing programs because it required no changes in the schools as a whole, there were funds available for it, and—perhaps most importantly—in this small team of reformers was a principal eager to allow his building to be used for this intervention.

However, experts in the field startled the team by advising that such a program might actually harm the children they were trying to help. "It seemed unethical to just disregard their opinion and continue with our plans," Weikart said. "After several weeks of discussion, we decided that the advisors had asked, but not answered, a legitimate question: Does preschool work?" With this challenging question to be answered, the High/Scope Perry Preschool study was born.

The Perry Study Begins

The study officially began in October 1962. From then until the spring of 1967, it was a service project being evaluated. A total of 123 low-income African American children, considered at high risk of school failure, were randomly assigned to either the program group (58 children) or the no-program group (65 children). The children assigned to the program group attended the Perry preschool class three hours a day, five days a week, during the regular school year for two years and had a 90-minute home visit by the same teacher each week. The children in the no-program group remained in the community, at home with their parents, without classes and home visits. From ages 3–11, both groups' progress was assessed each year. Assessment occurred again at ages 14–15, 19, 27, and finally, 40.

The results were beyond what anyone initially expected.

Early Findings

Before the children entered kindergarten, there was an extraordinary increase in program children's performance on intelligence tests. They had an average gain

of 15 IQ points, moving them out of the range of mild impairment and into the normal range of intellectual performance. The team was thrilled with these results and felt vindicated in the belief that they could provide an effective intervention in the lives of poor children at risk of school failure. These children could now come to the uncompromising elementary schools better able to engage in traditional education. “We couldn’t change the schools, but we could help children be better prepared,” Weikart said.

A worrisome problem emerged, however, as Weikart and his colleagues continued their yearly follow-up assessment. In the early elementary grades the program group’s measured level of intellectual performance was not very different from that of the no-program group. This elementary school finding, which had also been found in some studies of Head Start programs, put a damper on the team’s enthusiasm. However, by third grade things appeared to change again. While the measured IQ of the program group drifted down to the level of the no-program group, the program group significantly outperformed the no-program group in achievement test scores and some teacher ratings of classroom behavior. While critics pointed to the washout of IQ gains, the reformers pointed to the achievement gains and lower special education enrollment figures for program children. “I declared a victory,” said Weikart.

But the most dramatic, long-term, real-life program effects were yet to be seen.

Adolescent and Early Adult Years

Not only did the program group continue to outperform the no-program group on achievement tests at age 14, the effect was actually stronger than it had been several years earlier. Throughout the adolescent years, the program group showed stronger commitment to school than the no-program group, and more of the program group graduated from high school—particularly females, a remarkable 84 percent versus 32 percent. In addition, program females were less likely than no-program females to repeat a grade or be assigned to special education classes. The finding of a preschool-program effect on the high school graduation rate is important, because graduation is a gateway to other positive benefits. Jeanne Montie, High/Scope senior research associate and coauthor of the study, would later say, “The preschool program’s long-term effects were due to its shorter-term effects on children’s educational commitment and success.”

At age 27, more variables were included that offered a glimpse of how participants’ life paths were affecting not only themselves but also a new generation. For instance, 40 percent of women in the program group were married at the time of the age-27 interview, compared with only 8 percent of those in the no-program group; and 57 percent of women in the program group were single parents, compared with 83 percent of those in the no-program group.

The effects of the preschool program on participants were extending into the public in general as well. Consider crime rates among the two groups: Program participants at age 27 averaged significantly fewer arrests than no-program group members. By age 27, only 7 percent of adults who had participated in the Perry Preschool program had been arrested five or more times, compared with 35 percent of those in the no-program group. Also, the program group earned more money than the no-program group and were more likely to own their own homes. Through age 27, fewer had received welfare assistance or other social services at some time. Relentless data collection kept overall data loss to only 6 percent—making the results even more impressive.

Age-40 Phase

Would the findings of early adulthood hold through midlife? The age-40 phase was undertaken to answer this. With a continued low attrition rate, the study did in fact find results consistent with those from prior phases. Program participants continued to enjoy more economic success than nonparticipants; in fact, the earnings difference between the two groups was greater at age 40. More of the program group were employed (76 percent vs. 62 percent), and they had a higher median annual income (\$20,800 vs. \$15,300). Homes, cars, savings accounts—all were owned by more of the program group than the no-program group. Nobel-Prize-winning University of Chicago economist James J. Heckman, a study reviewer, said, “More than 35 years after they received an enriched preschool program, the Perry Preschool participants achieve much greater success in social and economic life than their counterparts” who did not participate in preschool. (See table on facing page.)

Another trend that continued from earlier phases of the study was a reduction in crime among program participants. The program group had significantly fewer lifetime arrests than the no-program group, including arrests for violent crimes, property crimes, and drug crimes. In addition, preschool participants were

sentenced to fewer months in prison or jail than those who did not attend preschool. Thus, the program group not only had a greater quality of life but also saved taxpayers money. “This study proves that investing in high-quality prekindergarten can make every family in America safer from crime and violence,” said Sanford Newman, president of Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. “To win the war on crime, we need to be as willing to guarantee our kids space in a prekindergarten program as we are to guarantee a criminal a prison cell.”

In addition to issues of economic performance and involvement in crime, researchers asked two major new questions in this phase: What are the participants’ health issues? Are personal success and social stability being passed on to a new generation? With regard to health, fewer program males reported abusing drugs, marijuana, or heroin, and fewer members overall of the program group reported health problems for ages 26 to 40 that stopped them from working for at least one week.

Effects on the children of study participants were not as clear. Although more of the program group said they were getting along very well with their family and more program males at age 40 raised their own children (57 percent vs. 30 percent), program males’ children did not differ very much from the children of no-program males in education, employment, arrests, or welfare status.

“These results are dramatic,” said Lawrence Schweinhart, president of High/Scope Foundation and coauthor of the Perry study. “In the areas of crime and earnings, particularly, we found even stronger effects of the preschool program at age 40 than at age 27.”

Cost-Benefit Analysis

So the Perry Preschool study demonstrated that a high-quality preschool education helped children better themselves intellectually, socially, and economically. Were there any economic benefits to taxpayers that might convince the public of the value of such education and influence policymakers who had power over preschool funding? There were. At age 27, a cost-benefit analysis showed that for every dollar spent on preschool, the public saved \$7.16 in tax dollars.

By age 40, the public savings had increased to \$12.90 (in year 2000 dollars, discounted at 3 percent). Most of this return came from savings due to program males committing fewer crimes; the rest came from education and welfare savings and increased taxes from higher earnings. Male program participants cost the

public 41% less in crime costs per person than they would have otherwise, and they earned 14% more per person than they would have otherwise. Matt Hennessee, president of Quiktrak, Inc., and chair of the High/Scope board of directors, remarked, “The economic return on investment is one of the best ever found for public investment or responsible private investment. Where else can you get [this kind of] return?”

The Future: What Impact Will the Perry Findings Have?

The High/Scope Perry Preschool study is a landmark study that redefines the importance of early childhood education in human lives and economics. It is the first study to find preschool program effects on educational placements, middle school achievement test scores, high school graduation rates, crime, earnings, and employment and the first to establish a large financial return on investment. As of now, it is the only study that has looked at the effects of an early childhood program through age 40.

The latest findings confirm that the benefits of high-quality preschool education extend not only to young adults but also to adults in midlife—these are lifetime effects. High-quality early care and education programs not only raise high school graduation rates and test scores, decades later they lead to higher incomes and lower crime rates. Moreover, the return to the public on its initial investment in such programs is not only substantial but larger than previously estimated.

The Perry project serves as a symbol of what government can achieve. “This study also offers a challenge, a kind of policy gauntlet, for decision makers at local, state, and national levels” said Schweinhart. “We need a good, solid national policy that involves federal and state government in different ways according to what they can do best. It’s time we get serious about funding high-quality early care and education for every child in America.”

Findings from this study and others have motivated policymakers to invest more in preschool programs, but these programs have seldom met standards of reasonable similarity to the Perry program. What are some of these standards? According to Schweinhart, they include “teachers who help children plan, do, and review self-chosen educational activities. Teachers who have bachelors’ degrees and certification in education. No more than eight children per teaching adult. Teachers who work closely with families, visiting

with them at least every month to discuss children's development. Children who are encouraged to solve problems and make their own choices." The Perry findings can be expected of any Head Start, state preschool, or child care program that has these features. "Given the extraordinary, lifetime effects of such programs, we owe it to all young children living in low-income families to provide access to these programs," Schweinhart said.

As much as these findings support the great value of high-quality preschool programs in breaking the cycle of poverty, however, such programs are only part of the solution. "The report doesn't say you are going to end crime," said Hennessee. "It doesn't say you are going to have zero people on public assistance, but it certainly does say rather clearly that you will have fewer people in the present criminal justice system, fewer people on public assistance." If we truly want to improve the life chances of our neediest children,

high-quality preschool education needs to be part of a multifaceted effort to solve our social problems. Affordable housing, ready access to health care, effective job-training programs, reduced institutional racism, and improved educational opportunities at all levels are also essential.

The landmark High/Scope Perry Preschool study stands as a testament to David Weikart's—and many others'—vision, tenacity, and belief that we can make a difference in the lives of children. The study through age 40 has ended, but it is up to all of us to make sure that its effects will reach far into the future.

The latest results of the Perry Preschool study are chronicled in *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, available from High/Scope Press. See also David Weikart's memoir of High/Scope Foundation, *How High/Scope Grew*. For details on ordering these books, please check our Web site: www.highscope.org/welcome.asp. A downloadable PowerPoint presentation on the Perry study is available at www.highscope.org/PerryProject/perrymain.htm.

FAQs About the Perry Preschool Study

Because the long-term High/Scope Perry Preschool study is well known and respected and has inspired public investment in early childhood programs, it has attracted many questions that deserve thoughtful answers. Here are some questions commonly asked.

Does the evidence of the effectiveness of the High/Scope educational model come only from programs run decades ago?

No. The Head Start FACES study (Zill et al., 2003) found that 4-year-olds in Head Start classes that used the High/Scope approach improved in letter and word identification skills and cooperative classroom behavior and decreased their behavior problems. In the High/Scope Training for Quality study (Epstein, 1993), High/Scope classrooms were rated significantly better than comparison classrooms in terms of classroom environment, daily routine, adult-child interaction, and overall program implementation. Children in High/Scope programs significantly outperformed children in comparison programs in initiative, social relations, music and movement, and overall child development.

Did the High/Scope Perry Preschool program achieve a level of quality that cannot be duplicated in ordinary preschool programs?

The high level of quality in the Perry program is generally perceived to be due to two factors: well-qualified teachers who were paid public school salaries, and the charismatic leadership of David Weikart. Though it is true that many preschool programs have difficulty attracting higher quality personnel due to low wages, more and more programs are hiring teachers at public school salaries. This trend should lead to more qualified teachers in the field, who are able to provide a high-quality educational experience similar to that of the Perry program.

Second, any dedicated preschool program director can exercise similar leadership to Weikart's by insisting on program quality, fidelity to a validated educational model, and providing staff with all the resources and encouragement needed, including adequate salaries.

Was the sample size too small to generate scientific confidence in the findings?

Statistical significance testing takes sample size into account. To achieve statistical significance, group differences must become larger in magnitude as sample sizes become smaller. If the High/Scope Perry Preschool study sample were truly too small, none of its findings would have achieved statistical significance.

Although the program had a strong effect on children's intellectual performance, didn't it fade out over time?

It is true that the Perry program had a statistically significant effect on children's IQs during and up to a year after the program, but not after that. Because the intelligence tests in this study were used to assess preschool program outcomes, they functioned more like achievement tests than intelligence tests. Imagine if achievement tests for grades 4–8 were all combined into one multiage test of achievement—it would not be surprising if a really good grade-4 classroom improved children's achievement test scores on this test at grades 4 and 5 levels but not at grades 6, 7, and 8 levels. This is what happened with the temporary effects of high-quality preschool programs on children's intellectual performance in the Perry study. Children with preschool program experience got more items right on age-specific batteries at their age level but did not get more right on age-specific batteries designed for older children. We might say that their intellectual performance was environmentally sensitive—it went up in intellectually stimulating preschool settings and down in less stimulating elementary school settings. However, all of the subsequent findings of program effects in the Perry study and others—school achievement, high school graduation, adult earnings, crime prevention—demonstrate that high-quality programs for disadvantaged young children do have positive long-term effects.

References

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