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Success by Empowerment: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 27

Lawrence J. Schweinhart and David P. Weikart

The High/Scope Perry Preschool study, now with findings through age 27, has more than ever to say about the importance to society of doing early childhood programs right. By virtue of an experimental design rarely achieved in research of this type, this study reveals that high-quality, active-learning programs for young children living in poverty return \$7.16 for every dollar invested, cut in half participants' crime rate through age 27, significantly increase participants' earnings and property wealth as adults, and significantly increase participants' commitment to marriage (Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart with Barnett & Epstein, 1993).

Although these findings address the environmental extremes of poverty versus a high-quality early childhood program, they apply to all children and not just to children living in poverty, in demonstrating that the quality of early childhood experiences affects all children for the rest of their lives. Similarly, the findings depend on the quality of the early childhood program, not on whether it happens to be in a child care center or home or Head Start center or public school.

*Differences are described as significant if their two-tailed probability of occurrence by chance is less than .05.

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The evidence of the High/Scope Perry study and similar studies clarifies what we can and must achieve as early childhood teachers and advocates. As teachers, we now know what we can do to positively influence young children for the rest of their lives. As early childhood advocates, we can say, in all modesty, that we have stronger evidence of the importance of our work than do teachers at any other level or workers in any other type of social service. Because society has not yet fully recognized and acknowledged the value of high-quality early childhood programs, we must communicate the importance of our work not only in testimony for policymakers

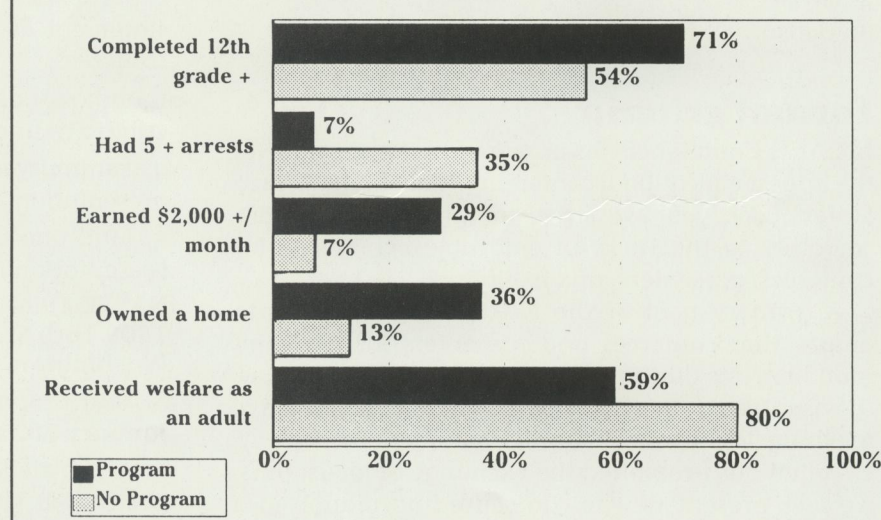
but also in day-to-day conversations with parents, supervisors, colleagues, and everyone else we encounter.

The promise of significant benefits

The High/Scope Perry study demonstrates the power of an experimentally designed longitudinal study to reveal program effects, even decades after the program. (Figure 1 summarizes the major findings at age 27.) To conduct the Perry study, project staff

- identified 123 young African American children living in poverty and at risk for school failure;

**Figure 1. High/Scope Perry Preschool Project:
Major Findings at Age 27**

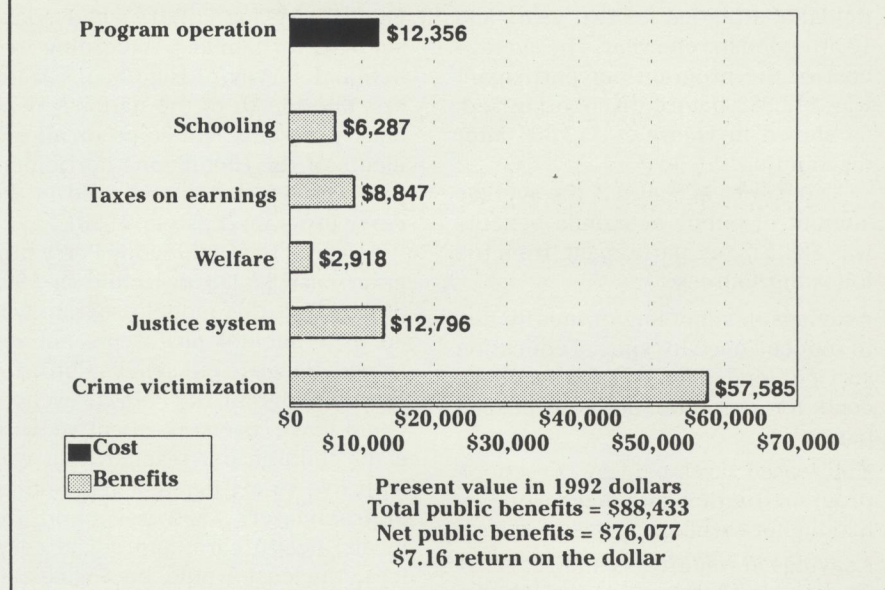


- randomly assigned 58 of them to a program group and 65 of them to a no-program group;
- provided the program group with a high-quality, active learning program at age 3 and 4;
- collected data on both groups annually from age 3 through 11 and at age 14, 15, 19, and 27; and
- after each phase of data collection, analyzed the data and wrote reports of the study.

In *educational performance* by age 27, the program group completed a significantly higher level of schooling than did the no-program group; 71% of the program group, but only 54% of the no-program group, graduated from either regular or adult high school or received General Education Development certification. Compared to the female no-program group, the female program group had a significantly higher rate of high school graduation or the equivalent (84% vs. 35%). The finding that a preschool program has an effect on the high school graduation rate is important because graduation is a gateway to other long-term effects. The finding has been corroborated in three other studies of preschool-program effects (Monroe & McDonald, 1981; Gotts, 1989; and Fuerst & Fuerst, 1993). Previous High/Scope Perry Preschool Project findings on educational performance indicated that the program group spent fewer than half as many years in programs for educable mental impairment as did the no-program group (group means of 1.1 years vs. 2.8 years) and scored significantly higher on tests of educational performance at the ages of 4 to 7, 14, 19, and 27.

Regarding *crime prevention*, police and court records showed that program-group members averaged 2.3 arrests, half the number of 4.6 arrests averaged by no-program-group members. Only 7% of the program group had been arrested five or more times, compared to 35% of the no-program group. Only 12% of the program males had been arrested five or more times—one fourth as many compared to 49% of the no-program males. Only 7% of the program group had ever been arrested for drug dealing, significantly fewer than the 25% of the

Figure 2. High/Scope Perry Preschool Project: Public Cost and Economic Benefits Per Participant



no-program group. Program-group members also spent significantly less time on probation than did no-program-group members (12% vs. 26% ever on probation). Similarly, the Syracuse University Family Development Research Program (Lally, Mangione, & Honig, 1988), a study of the effects of a program of high-quality day care and weekly home visits, showed that significantly fewer program-group than no-program-group members had been placed on probation for delinquent offenses as teens (6% vs. 22%).

Regarding *economic development*, 29% of the program group reported monthly earnings at age 27 of \$2,000 or more, significantly greater than the 7% of the no-program group who reported such earnings. For males the difference resulted from better-paying jobs; 42% of the program males, compared to only 6% of the no-program males, reported monthly earnings of \$2,000 or more. For females employment rates accounted for the difference; 80% of the program females, but only 55% of the no-program females, were employed at the interview time of age 27. Significantly more of the program group than the no-program group owned their own homes (36% vs. 13%) and owned two cars (30% vs. 13%). Ac-

cording to social services records and interviews of study participants at age 27, significantly fewer program-group members than no-program-group members received welfare assistance or other social services in the past ten years (59% vs. 80%).

Regarding *commitment to marriage*, although the same percentages of program and no-program males were married (26%), there were differences in the length of their marriages. Among those who married, program males were married an average of 6.2 years, nearly twice as long as the average for no-program males (3.3 years). Among the females, 40% of the program group, but only 8% of the no-program group, were married at age 27. While 57% of the births to program females were out-of-wedlock, 83% of the births to no-program females were out-of-wedlock.

Return on investment was calculated in a benefit-cost analysis (reported by W. Steven Barnett in Schweinhart, Barnes, et al., 1993) that involved the estimation of the program's monetary value and its effects, in constant 1992 dollars discounted annually at three percent. Although the analysis included economic benefits to program participants, only the economic benefits to the public, as taxpayers and as potential crime victims, are pre-

sented here. The average annual cost of the program was \$7,258 per participant. Forty-five of the program participants attended for two years and 13 attended for one year. The average cost of the program per participant was \$12,888 before discounting and, as shown in Figure 2, \$12,356 after discounting.

Also shown in Figure 2, the average amount of public economic benefits was \$88,433 per participant, from the following sources:

- savings in schooling, primarily due to reduced need for special education services and despite added college costs for preschool-program participants;
- increased taxes paid by preschool-program participants because they had higher earnings;
- savings in welfare assistance;
- savings to the criminal justice system; and
- savings on in-court and out-of-court settlements for would-be victims of crimes.

The \$88,433 in benefits divided by the \$12,356 in cost per participant results in a benefit-cost ratio of \$7.16 returned to the public for every dollar invested in the High/Scope Perry Preschool program; thus, the program was an extremely good economic investment, better than most alternative public uses of society's resources and better than most private-sector investments.

Relevance to existing programs

The High/Scope Perry Preschool study shows what programs for young children living in poverty can achieve *if these programs are done right*. The High/Scope Perry program was developed as a model of early childhood education with substantial outreach to parents, meant to be emulated and adapted in the context of local circumstances. Head Start and similar programs are, by and large,

service programs for young children living in poverty, including not only outreach to parents but meals and health care for children and social services for families. According to a national survey of High/Scope trainers, one fourth of the nation's Head Start programs use some or all elements of the High/Scope curriculum that was developed and used in the Perry program (Epstein, 1993).

A year of the High/Scope Perry program cost \$7,258 per child in 1992 dollars; but this model program was an experimental prototype, not designed for cost efficiency. Run as a service program, the Perry preschool could have been as effective with eight children per teacher as it was with five to six per teacher. Adding approximately \$500 per child for meals, health care, and social services, the cost would be \$5,500 per child. A year in Head Start in 1992 cost \$4,100 per child. Run at the recommended level of quality, Head Start too would cost \$5,500 per child, with full-day programs costing somewhat more per child. Increases in Head Start funding per child to enhance program quality should go to systematic in-service curriculum training, curriculum supervision, observational assessment of programs and children, and higher staff salaries and benefits. School districts and community agencies that spend less per child are probably doing so not because of any greater efficiency but because they have sacrificed program elements that are crucial to the quality and effectiveness of the program and its economic return on investment.

Since President Clinton was elected, there has been much talk in Congress and throughout the country of full funding for Head Start. Despite increased funding of such programs in recent years, only 58% of preschoolers (three years old to kindergarten-entry age) from households with incomes less than \$10,000 attend any type of preschool program, compared to 79% of preschoolers

from households with incomes more than \$30,000 (West, Hausken, & Collins, 1993). Full funding, however, must also mean the full funding per child that is necessary to ensure program quality.

Program quality: The key to significant benefits

The High/Scope Perry Preschool study and similar studies suggest that high-quality programs for young children produce significant long-term benefits because they

- **empower children** by encouraging them to initiate and carry out their own learning activities,
- **empower parents** by involving them as full partners with teachers in supporting their children's development, and
- **empower teachers** by providing them with systematic in-service curriculum training and supportive curriculum supervision.

Empowering children

The National Association for the Education of Young Children has defined developmentally appropriate practice as a basis for program quality (Bredekamp, 1987). Central to this definition is the idea that young children are active learners who can initiate their own learning activities and function as active learners, rather than mere passive recipients of information from others. Such active learning empowers children to assume a measure of control over their environment and develop the conviction that they have some control over their lives. At the same time, children are learning how to solve their everyday intellectual, social, and physical problems. Erikson (1963) pointed out that preschoolers are developing a sense of initiative, responsibility, and independence. They develop these qualities, however, as byproducts of their active learning experiences, not by memorizing self-esteem slogans that are not grounded in their actual social experience. In the High/Scope curriculum (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979; Hohmann & Weikart, in press) that was developed during

The full report, *Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 27* by L.J. Schweinhart, H.V. Barnes, & D.P. Weikart with W.S. Barnett & A.S. Epstein is available from the High/Scope Press, 600 N. River Street, Ypsilanti, MI 48198, 313-485-2000.



the High/Scope Perry program, children plan their learning activities, carry out these activities in a materials-rich environment, and report on their experiences afterwards. This plan-do-review process helped children in the Perry program develop their abilities and sense of control over their environment. Through home visits the parents, too, came to see their children as active learners.

The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison study (Schweinhart, Weikart, & Larner, 1986) helped identify the lasting value of developmentally appropriate practices and child-initiated learning activities. The study compared the effects of three approaches to early childhood education. Two of them, the High/Scope approach and the traditional nursery-school approach, supported child-initiated learning activities; the other, the direct-instruction approach, encouraged children to respond to fast-paced, scripted questions from the teacher. While the intellectual performance of all three groups improved substantially—an average of 27 IQ points in one year—High/Scope and nursery-school group members at age 15 reported engaging in half as many delinquent acts as did the members of the direct-instruction group, including one fifth as many property offenses. The programs that emphasized child-initiated learning activities appear to have improved children's social responsibility considerably more than did the direct instruction-program.

Early childhood teachers who want to encourage children to initiate their own learning activities often face the obstacle of *misassessment* of children's performance (Schweinhart, 1993). Most tests focus only on language and mathematics and insist that children provide the one right answer on demand. As an alternative to such assessment procedures, we developed the High/Scope Child Observation Record (COR), a process of taking notes on children's day-to-day behavior, then rating the behavior on 30 five-level developmental items representing children's initiative, social relations, creative representation, music and movement, language and literacy, and logic and mathematics. A two-year study established the High/Scope COR's reliability and concurrent validity when used by trained Head Start teachers and assistant teachers (Schweinhart, McNair, Barnes, & Larner, 1993). Widespread use of such assessment tools in early childhood programs will maintain the integrity of developmentally appropriate programs while responding to demands for accountability.

Empowering parents

The High/Scope Perry Preschool program included weekly home visits by the teachers with the parents, as well as regularly scheduled group meetings. Each home visit lasted about an hour and a half and involved the child as well as the parent in discussion and modeling of activities

like the child's activities in the classroom. The initial goal each year was to establish rapport with parents new to the program. Rather than trying to meet all of the family's needs, the home visitor's focus was on the child and the parent-child relationship. The parents came to see their children as active learners who were capable of learning. The parent component of the program empowered the parents to support their children's development of a sense of control and their intellectual, social, and physical abilities. Today, observational assessment tools like the High/Scope COR can facilitate the dialogue between teachers and parents concerning their children's development.

To develop working relationships with children's parents, teachers must surmount various obstacles, not the least of which is their own reluctance to develop such relationships. Ironically, one obstacle can be the extent of teacher contact time with children (that is, the length of class sessions). Teachers need adequate time when they are not in contact with children so that they can engage in home visits or other activities with parents and plan for activities with children and with parents. Programs in which teachers provide double half-day sessions or full-day sessions five days a week do not allow teachers any time for activities with parents. Another obstacle is the lack of parents' availability because they are otherwise occupied in work, schooling, or other activities. Teachers need to help parents become involved by using strategies such as alternative scheduling and providing child care during group meetings. Another obstacle to home visits can be the lack of safety in some communities, due to the prevalence of criminal violence and drug abuse. Early childhood program staff cannot surmount this obstacle alone, but they may reduce their anxieties somewhat by developing rapport with the parents.

Empowering teachers

To engage in the practices that empower children and parents, teachers need to be empowered themselves through systematic in-service curricu-

lum training and supportive curriculum supervision. Such training and supervision were key elements of the High/Scope Perry program.

The national High/Scope Training of Trainers evaluation (Epstein, 1993) indicated that such training and supervision in the High/Scope curriculum could significantly improve the effectiveness of early childhood programs that had already achieved a high degree of quality in other ways. The evaluation found that systematic in-service curriculum training is most successful in promoting program quality when an agency has a supportive administration that includes a trained curriculum specialist on staff who provides teachers with hands-on workshops, observation and feedback, and follow-up sessions. Effective trainers focus on a coherent, validated, developmentally appropriate curriculum model, such as the High/Scope curriculum. The evaluation found that each certified High/Scope trainer worked with an average of 25 teachers and assistant teachers in 13 classrooms and that the teachers they trained scored significantly better than did comparable teachers without such training, not only in their understanding of the High/Scope curriculum but also in their implementation of the approach. The evaluation also found that children in the High/Scope classrooms scored significantly higher than did children in comparison classrooms in initiative, social relations, music and movement, and overall development.

Just as teacher-child ratio is important to program effectiveness, so is it important that early childhood program delivery systems have one curriculum trainer for every 25 teachers and assistant teachers. The High/Scope Training of Trainers evaluation found that trainers spent only eight hours a week, on the average, providing training; but, in many situations teachers do not have any access to staff trainers. Cohesive curriculum training and supervision requires the development and improvement of early childhood program delivery systems, such as Head Start, public school districts, child care agencies, and networks of family child care

homes. Such training and supervision should also be backed by publicly supported evaluation, research, and product development.

As public funding of early childhood programs increases, it must go beyond full funding for children living in poverty to providing decreasing percentages of funding for children as their family household economic level increases. In this way we can begin to overcome the strong socioeconomic segregation that now characterizes publicly funded programs. Ultimately, the walls between public and private early childhood programs must become much more permeable.

Only part of the solution

As much as these High/Scope Perry Preschool study findings support the potential of early childhood programs to improve quality of life and reduce social costs, such programs are only part of the solution. To address the problems of crime, drug abuse, poverty, welfare dependence, and unemployment, the nation must also employ a range of other social-policy strategies. Affordable housing, universal access to health care, effective job-training programs, reduction of institutional racism, and improved educational opportunities at all levels are essential. Among these many efforts to improve the nation's quality of life, high-quality, active-learning early childhood programs—and the teachers who provide them—should hold a central and respected position.

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