When is Research Good Research?

The Head Start Impact Study

by Yasmina Vinci

Does Head Start work? Despite decades of research demonstrating that it does, a study released in December 2012 by the Department of Health and Human Services has been loudly proclaimed by opponents of Head Start as proof that the program is a failure. But is that really what this study shows?

Nobel laureate economist and early education champion James Heckman said to NPR in February 2012, "Many people have focused on the recent Head Start evaluation saying there's no effect. I think the Head Start evaluation is an example of the folly of uncritical use of so-called randomized trials." A week later Fareed Zakaria wrote in *TIME Magazine*, "Critics are jumping to conclusions about a very complicated subject without really understanding the study — or the limitations of social-science research."

Yasmina Vinci is the Executive Director of the National Head Start Association. She began her career in early care and education with 10 years as a director of a child care center and has dedicated many years to pursuing the highest quality early services for all children, services that include the empowerment of families and support the development of the whole child.

The findings of the National Head Start Impact Study are more complicated than any one-line answer can express, and Heckman and Zakaria are both right: Without thinking critically about what good research *is*, we can't understand what it *says*. Below are a few key questions we need to ask about all research and about the Impact Study in particular.

Is the Study Designed to Get Clear Answers to the Question Being Asked?

Randomized control trials (one group gets treatment A and another group gets treatment B) are considered the gold standard design in medicine and other scientific fields. In recent years, Congress has pressed for more of this type of research related to government programs. In fact, this randomized control study of Head Start was required by Congress as part of the Head Start reauthorization in 1998. For some questions, like "Does going to Head Start change how much parents read with children?" it seems like this type of study would give a clear answer. One group of children goes to Head Start, one doesn't, and measurement of parents' reading is measured as the result.

In practice, however, studies aren't carried out so cleanly and findings are often difficult to interpret. Unlike a science experiment, people don't always do as they're told. For example, of the 5,000 three- and four-year-old children in the Impact Study whose parents tried to sign them up for Head Start, equal numbers were told they could or couldn't attend. Among the four year olds, only 77% of those admitted to the study group showed up; at the same time, those in the control group went to a wide variety of other settings — including a few who ended up in other Head Start programs. All of that makes it very difficult to interpret differences between the groups of children at the end of one year, let alone four years later. Were the differences between them small at the end of first grade because benefits had faded away, or were they small because the children in both groups had similar experiences? The study doesn't offer a clear answer.

Do Findings Apply Beyond the Children Studied?

Research studies try to balance having a manageable number of participants with having a large enough group that findings will apply to a larger population. To study children's favorite colors, asking

a million children would be unreasonable, but asking only three probably wouldn't give a real answer. The ability of a study to apply to a larger group is its 'generalizability.'

The Head Start Impact Study has better generalizability than many other studies because it included far more children than most previous research on early learning programs. Those that are best known, like Perry Preschool and Abecedarian, enrolled fewer than 200 children. However, here another concern arises: When so many programs are considered together, do the results describe any of them? If children from one program achieve incredibly well and children from another fall behind, the study could show that overall there was no effect, missing the chance to learn from successes and fix weakness.

Are Findings Meaningful for Informing Practice?

The ultimate purpose of research is to gain new knowledge in answer to a question about why something happens or how it works. In education, good research is well-designed, generalizable, and helps us think about how to serve children and families better. The initial findings of the Impact Study showed that at the end of one year, children with access to Head Start did significantly better than children without access to Head Start in every domain of learning that was measured. The most recently released findings showed that at the end of third grade, there were only small differences between these two groups.

Where does that get us? Based on the findings of the study, we don't know what caused children without Head Start to catch up over the kindergarten-to-third grade years. Did they get more attention because they had greater needs? Other research suggests this is the case, and if that's true, it wouldn't make sense to say that the problem was with Head Start. However, without clear evidence it's difficult to draw a conclusion from the Impact Study. In terms of which interventions are most effective for which children, the information that could do the most to further Head Start's work with young children, the study provides no meaningful answers.

There's no question that research is important, or that good research should drive understanding and practice. Yet we must all be vigilant about thinking through what we read and how it's interpreted. Because the truth is, every day Head Start makes a difference for children and families.

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