

In Celebration of Head Start's 40th Anniversary 2005: Education & Early Childhood Development

E. Dollie Wolverton: I literally was a trainer in preparation for the summer of 1965 and trained the first teams of teachers and teachers' aides. And at that time, the teachers' aides were always parents of the Head Start children. And it was very exciting. Not only did we do the training and it was week-long training, 40 hours, we had these wonderful materials from Washington, D.C., called "The Rainbow Series."

And they touched on each aspect of this comprehensive child development program about health and nutrition, and involving parents, of course, involving the community and also having an age-appropriate curriculum and learning experiences for the children.

Dorothy Harris: The toys we had were just scraps that you would pick up, volunteers would bring. And there weren't the companies making age-appropriate toys in those days. So the puzzles were those tiny, thin pieces of paper that children that age had difficulty manipulating. And then we had these companies that started to make these big puzzles with large pieces of board so that children could really use those and they were age-appropriate.

Mary Lewis: In the early seventies when we had the OCD fellows, one of the jobs that one of them did was to build a kit of materials that we tried out in several demonstration grantees around the region in which the kit maker had gotten materials to use to show that you could use everyday materials in a way that fostered growth as it is defined in developmental charts for children but to focus on using things that were easy to get.

You did not have to spend your money buying a lot of expensive equipment to do this kind of teaching. The cognitive kit was on the ordering of beads. This kit contains colored beads, round beads, square beads large beads, small beads, which the children could use to follow patterns of alternation of the sizes, colors, and shapes.

Ernest Clark: Mary Lewis taught us that we weren't to tower over the children that we should sit in the seats or we should bend to the point that we were meeting the children so they would have someone to speak to and relate as opposed to great big adults. So we spent a lot of time on just simple things that we had to learn to really pay attention to what happened in the education of the children.

Lenore Peay: Head Start children have always had literacy. I think what we used to say, "learning through play." And I think maybe the higher-ups thought learning through play was all play. But they probably don't remember when they were a child (laughs) because math skills, reading skills, science all come out of working through play and making children feel good about who they are.

Diane Trister Dodge: I remember back in those days how difficult it was for teachers to understand the concept of free choice, that children could go to different interest areas, and that it would not be chaotic if you had a lot of choices for children and they could go to the area that they were most interested in playing and use materials well, that the teacher's role was to really observe children and pick up on what they were interested in, and to know what to say and how to guide their learning.

And that was a very hard concept to get across. The only way I was able to do that was to set up a demonstration classroom with a teacher who understood that approach so that people could see for themselves that it really did work when you had a well-organized rich environment and when you taught children how to make choices. And that's such an important thing for children to learn.

Marilyn Smith: It didn't matter as much which curriculum as long as there was a very carefully thought through curriculum that the people at the site and the agency in the program had been involved in selecting, they believed in it and then they could implement it well. Those were the most important factors rather than some one or two groups have the final curriculum that everybody should use.

John M. Chavez: Head Start was from the very beginning very smart in that it didn't say, "This is the Head Start model. This is what it's gonna be." It's not. It provided a comprehensive approach and then saying to people, "You

decide what you want Head Start to be. Do you want a Montessori approach? Do you want it to have a traditional approach? Do you want it to go ahead and have a bilingual approach?" Each center varies depending on what the parents and the community decided.

Jenni Klein: We all thought what would be best for children who come into a program, what kind of staff they needed, what kind of program they needed, what kind of training was important, what kind of written standards had to be set up so that every program had a certain goal to reach. And that's what was developed, and that's what came about. And the Head Start standards are still there.

Judith Jerald: One thing that I believe we really did right with Early Head Start is we started out with the first 68 programs. We selected 17 of them to go through an impact study and evaluation. So we learned a whole lot about what we were doing. And one of the things we've learned is that if we implement the Performance Standards, as they're intended to be implemented, we get better results than if we don't. This is very good news.

Angel Contreras: We decided this program ought to be bilingual. We ought to be able to use both languages. The kids already know Spanish, and they're learning English. Maybe if we work it right they'll come out of Head Start knowing two languages and hopefully they'll be able to keep their Spanish because we knew English was just gonna wipe everything out if they didn't have a chance to use their own language.

Ruth Neale: There are Polish people in the classrooms and we feel our children are not bilingual here. They're trilingual. And one little boy was asked which book he'd like to take out for the weekend. And he picked up this book that was in Polish.

And the teacher said to him, "Why are you taking that?" He said, "I know Polish." What happens is they hear enough of the words that they all pick up, and they are able to understand "You may be Polish, but you're no different than I. We both play with the blocks. We both pull and share. And we both can throw if we have to. And we have to learn that you don't do this in school." So the signs are up for the children. And if you were to ask them a question, some of them they can answer in any of the three languages even though English is the dominant universal tie for everybody here.

Carmen Bovell-Chester: It's like Head Start has left no stone unturned to consider multicultural principles, to respect the home language, the home culture of the children in the program, to go so far as to require staff in the program to speak the language of the children.

Sharon Lynn Kagan: At the core of everything was wonderful in early childhood education. There is something to Head Start -- whether it be people, whether it be the program, whether it be the curriculum, whether it be Head Start's Performance Standards, its commitment to parents, its commitment to comprehensive services or its commitment to research. For me, Head Start represents the national mecca for high-quality early childhood education.

I've often said, as Head Start goes, so goes American early childhood education. And as American early childhood education goes, so goes the world's early childhood education.

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