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Eight Head Start teachers were asked to be consultants in an assessment of the Head Start program and their role in it. The teachers met with a seminar leader from the Evaluation and Research Center at Boston University for seven consecutive 2-hour taped sessions. The topics for discussion included (1) the administrative structure of the agency in which they worked, (2) teacher training prior to working and inservice training, (3) supervision and support given to teachers, (4) conditions under which teachers work and the anxieties generated by them, (5) the gap between the needs of the children and the type of program offered, and (6) the public schools and the lack of communication with them. Some of the specific points made by the Head Start teachers in the seminar were as follows: (1) there exist serious inadequacies in the administration of Head Start programs, (2) job security is unsatisfactory, (3) more knowledge or training is necessary concerning the unique problems of Head Start children, and (4) the Head Start curriculum is often very unsatisfactory. (WD)

HEAD START EVALUATION AND RESEARCH CENTER

TEACHER SEMINAR[1]

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ABSTRACT

The person most often bypassed when describing Headstart is the teacher. Teachers are often told what they are doing - but seldom asked why. This motivated the Evaluation and Research Center at Boston University to ask Headstart teachers to be consultants concerning the description of their program.

Eight Headstart teachers met for seven consecutive two-hour taped sessions. The following areas were discussed at length:

1. Administrative structure of the agency in which they worked.
2. Teacher training prior to working and in-service training.
3. Supervision and support given to teachers.
4. Conditions under which teachers work, and the anxieties generated by them.
5. Assumptions made concerning the needs of children--and the gap between needs and the program offered.
6. The public schools and lack of communication with them.

The seminar was, for most, the first opportunity to meet as a body and discuss mutual problems and needs.

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1 "The research reported herein was performed pursuant to a contract with the Office of Economic Opportunity, Executive Office of the President, Washington, D.C., 20506. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and should not be construed as representing the opinions or policy of any agency of the United States Government."

TEACHER SEMINAR[1]

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The teacher seminar was initiated for the purpose of providing teachers with an opportunity to asses their experiences while working in Headstart. Participants came from many types of Headstart agencies (school dominated, rural, urban, single purpose, multi-purpose). They were asked to participate as consultants to the Evaluation & Research Center--the contribution was made with obvious enthusiasm (and relief) by these teachers. They are most often the lastoperson to be asked to contribute to a research project that inevitably describes them. It was a long journey from cathartic discussion to a realistic relating of facts and issues.

The eight participants[2] began to mutually explore the physical and political surroundings in which they found themselves. The initial discussion grew from a natural curiosity about each others, however it was later clear that there was an absence of opportunity for Headstart teachers to meet outside their own agency. All were amazed at the diversity of "conditions"[3] in which they worked. Each session was tape recorded. The seminar leader[4] in cooperation with Evaluation & Research Center staff members had developed topic areas to be explored. The seminar was held once each week, at Boston University, for seven consecutive weeks. For her services, each teacher was paid as a consultant. Each participant was the "head teacher" in her classroom, a title assigned by the particular Headstart agency for which she worked, since they were responsible only for their individual classrooms.

Headstart Teachers: How do they view their jobs? Although there were a variety of views uttered during the seminars, there was also a striking unanimity of feelings shared. In general, Headstart teachers said their job was to "help deprived and handicapped children." Since defining this aim was so important, the group spent a great deal of time on it. Every teacher made lengthy statements about the administration each time she attempted to describe her position. All felt there were gross inadequacies in the administration of Headstart programs, and that these inadequacies were stumbling blocks in their ability to function effectively as teachers. In many cases, the most serious obstacle to working towards a program goal were the demands made on teacher time outside the classroom. These outside demands included home visits, business meetings, and smoothing out relations with agencies in which their classrooms were housed. One teacher stated that she felt like a "revolutionary" in agency meetings rather than in the classroom. In some instances, the administrative problems of Headstart center were so overwhelming that the very survival of the program was the all important focus. This left the teachers with the conclusion that survival of programs consumed more of their energies than the education of children. Many felt that program survival was

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2 Linda Filiurin, Gail Kursteiner, Dorothy Latham, Edith Martin, Gail O'Connell, Judith Prymack, Mary Rosen, Caroline Wyatt, asst. to seminar director Wilma Snowdon.

3 Quotation marks are in reference to remarks made on the seminar tapes by participants.

4 Sandra Alexanian

an area in which they had no training. A number of agencies were cited as being responsible for the inefficient progress of the child development, Headstart program; among them were public schools, police, government funding agencies, city politicians and welfare agencies. Headstart teachers saw themselves as instructors of preschool children who presently were handicapped, or would be handicapped in the future. Yet the time that was needed to deal with these "handicaps" was often encrouched upon by administrators and community leaders.

Being a Headstart teacher can be described from many viewpoints. Income is one aspect that was explored. No teacher in the seminar had a written contract, and there seemed to be little relationship between hours and salary. Within the group where teachers who worked five half days with no home visits, salaried at approximately the same level as teachers with daily morning and afternoon sessions and total parent coverage. There was no financial compensation for many hours of required work undertaken outside the classroom. No teacher has a guarantee of a job for the coming year, nor, for that matter, for the next month. Many were unsure of who their administrators would be, since at present they were "under fire"[5] Program at the administrative level is a major problem.

Experience: Does it influence program adequacy?

The competance of this group of teachers may be unique since there is a large employment pool in Massachusetts from which to recruit. Seven of the eight participants had earned at least one degree.[6] Six of the seven degrees were in education. One teacher held a masters degree. Approximately half the teachers had worked in related educational areas (retardation, day care, settlement house) while the remainder had not worked in the area of sociogenously handicapped children.

Job orientation varied tremendously. Some teachers received a one week orientation and still others received an eight week training program, while one teacher had been hired the week prior to class opening. Most participants felt their orientation programs, though helpful in the areas of songs, stories, games, etc., were naive in the area of social problems. Teachers know before hand that their classes contained problems, but the concepts of "cultural deprivation," "alienated communities," "unrealistic curriculum expectation" needed discussion and demonstration in order to translate these concepts into concrete, educational activities.

Some agencies successfully utilized experienced classroom teachers in their in-service training programs, preschool courses for college credit, staff counselling and support. Unfortunately, much of the "so-called in-service training," "educational consultations" and "demonstration classes" that appear in proposals were devoted to business meetings, administrative assistance by teachers, and community work. Many agencies were ignorant of the services offerred by their "Regional Training Office."

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[5] Presently all but two teachers have new directors.

[6] The participant without a degree is now the director of her agency's program.

Teachers felt that some bodies of knowledge concerning research with children and techniques used with handicapped children should be mandatory. Teachers wanted to know such things as "What are the language deficits of ghetto children, and if they exist, how specifically can I help my class?" "How as a teacher do I ascertain what will be expected of my children?" and "Who is responsible for interpreting my activities to the public schools and the community?" "Who is my support?" "If I as a teacher work with parents and community leaders, teach children, train my aide, and attend business meetings, who in the OEO framework looks out for the teacher?" This point (in many forms) was constantly reiterated throughout the seminar. "Who cares about me?" "Am I dispensible?" "Am I reflecting the frustrations of many parents?" "If Congress doesn't care, there won't be a program." A phrase "the poverty program syndrome" was an "in group" joke that served to express the group's anxiety.

Some teachers had previous experiences which they felt had helped them to "survive." These included group and agency work, enough experience with preschoolers to be confident in teaching activities, community acceptance, hearing a well-informed speaker discuss the problems of their agency community, and past employment or participation in the community in which they now taught. All felt they needed to know more--more knowledge concerning the unique problems of children, more understanding of sociological problems in the community and more concerning OEO as an orgainzation. All teachers expressed a desire to be observed, trained, supported and supervised. All wished to be recognized and given a voice in a program that they were asked to defend. "You have to believe in Headstart to teach in it."

Teacher Assumptions: How they effect curriculum? This area was examined from the view that what a teacher spends time on in the classroom reflects what she as a person feels children need to learn. When we described what teachers spent their day doing--one couldn't help feeling that perhaps their classes were being conducted similarly to any average preschool nursery. This observation disturbed the teachers! Upon examining the activities in each class, two activity areas were shared by all: 1) Routines: including toilet, milk, entering and leaving, rest and lunch. This consumed as much as 50% of each day. 2) Free Play: was the activity that teachers felt was necessary as a vehicle for many developmental activities in their classrooms. The time this activity consumed varied from 10-40% of the day. However, "free-play" in itself deserved a conference! Other activities were: arts and crafts, games, trips, story time and circle activities. The parent-teacher activities, teachers felt, often addressed themselves more realistically to child oriented problems than did the classroom.

Upon examining classroom programs and the assumptions behind them--the group experienced shock and frustration at the distance between the activity in the classroom and the needs of the children. Teachers could not help feeling that their programs reflected those models developed for "white, middle class" children--and that perhaps "we value these in such a way--we don't want our classes to miss this." The feeling of "making up" for something missed seems very often to be the essence of the Poverty Program. Although teachers could communicate and illustrate the physical and intellectual needs of children in their classes, classroom activities often did not reflect these needs of children "If the problems of these children are so unique then why isn't the program?" Teachers did not have any way of evaluating the impact and outcome of their teaching--so it never changed. This kind of isolation seemed to be attributed to a lack of specific training with culturally deprived children and an absence of an evaluation program to describe public school expectations (and inequities if they exist).

The public school, their involvement in the Poverty Program, their hostility toward it, their ingnorance or indifference to it, all became areas for much discussion. Teachers felt that the public schools' inability to deal with the special problems of children and their "unwillingness" to develop a realistic curriculum was the real justification for programs like Headstart. However, this too became clouded with doubt when one teacher said "is it really fair to give children the feeling that Headstart is like school--maybe they'd be better off never given this freedom." All but one teacher felt the schools were inadequate. All reported hostile reactions toward the Poverty Program by many public school teachers. No Headstart teacher had ever been part of a meeting including Headstart personnel, kindergarten or grade one public school teachers. Headstart teachers saw public school personnel as unsympathetic to the "special" needs of Headstart children and that children were often penalized for their participation in Headstart." Parents, too, were reported to be suffering the contrast between "total acceptance in Headstart and the negative indifference of the public schools." Teachers in Headstart expressed a desire to observe in public schools--and to have kindergarten and grade one teachers observe their children prior to their entrance in public schools. A positive desire to cooperate in exploring ways to bridge the gap between Headstart and grade one was expressed.

What is Headstart All About? Headstart has been defined separately by children, parents, taxpayers, and teachers. It is seen differently by all. The seminar simplified this by attempting to isolate teacher goals for children. The following are a sample of aims expressed during the discussion. The purpose of Headstart was: 1) To develop a positive self image within children. 2) To give children an opportunity to socialize. 3) To give children an understanding of their community and it's vocabulary. 4) To give children an understanding of the vocabulary and surroundings of more advantaged children. 5) To prepare children for public school intellectually and behaviorally 6) To prepare parents for intervention with their children. 7) To improve the mental and physical health of preschool children. 8) To involve the community in the educational fate of their children. 9) To develop new ways for remediating learning deficits. All goals were not held in common.

The lack of uniform program impact was attributed to lack of communication within agencies, agencies with communities and agencies with each other and the OEO administration. Teachers saw a need for realistic training on the part of agencies working with disadvantaged children. Supervision and support by people specifically trained in the area was also cited as a need. Lastly there needed to be a separation of goals for teachers, parents, politians and agencies. Impact varied because of the wide variety of needs being administered to with the same "OEO dose."

The wide spectrum of problems facing Headstart teachers and administrators could well be discussed on a continuing basis, with an attempt to deal with the information in a scientific way. However, with this project, when the tapes were edited, "positive" and "negative" were clearly a matter of opinion. The participants themselves felt that the "tapes" spoke for themselves and that we should "tell it like it is." The problems are constantly changing. This fluctuation, the biggest aggravation, is perhaps the program's salvation. "It allows us (teachers) to do what we want before we are told what we have to do." The indecision which the group felt at the terminating session of the seminar exemplifies the indecision of the program's future.