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A Good Beginning

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Book Review

HEAD START: The Inside Story of America's Most Successful Educational Experiment

By Edward Zigler and Susan Muenchow

EDWARD ZIGLER is one of a handful of people who helped shape Head Start -- a comprehensive education and health program for poor preschool-age children -- during its exciting birth in Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty, and who stayed around to nurture and guide it through the cold days under Presidents Nixon, Carter (yes, Carter) and Reagan. In this book, he and Susan Muenchow provide a first-person history of how personality and chance often had as much to do with Head Start's survival as did its intrinsic qualities.

Because of Head Start's present popularity -- it was even in Ronald Reagan's safety net -- we tend to forget how, in the administrations before his, Head Start had to fend off threats to its very survival. My favorite story describes a meeting in which Nixon administration officials pressed Zigler to divert Head Start funds to "Sesame Street" because the TV show might be just as effective in helping disadvantaged children and would be much cheaper (65 cents per child versus \$ 1,000). Zigler reports that they stopped pressing only after he asked: "How long would a poor child have to watch 'Sesame Street' to get his or her teeth filled?"

Insider stories such as this make the book interesting and often revealing. The chapter titled "The Carter Surprise," for example, describes how an administration led by long-time supporters of the program was ready to hand it over to the soon-to-be-created Department of Education; only sustained lobbying of the Congress prevented what many felt would be a catastrophic change in the program's orientation. The irony, not lost on the authors, is that it took two conservative Republican administrations to cement Head Start's status as everyone's favorite anti-poverty program.

But the book is more than a simple history of past events. It seeks to set an agenda for a revitalized and reshaped Head Start -- one that reflects what has been learned in the last 25 years.

Zigler and Muenchow begin with a remarkably candid assessment of Head Start's strengths and weaknesses. "In the course of writing this book," they report, "we saw some wonderful Head Start centers, but we also observed some that were a discredit to the program's reputation." They

also recognize that the challenges facing the program are greater than ever; as a former official of the National Head Start Association put it: "We look back to the poverty of the early 1970s as the good old days. Poverty is getting uglier."

Many readers, however, will be disappointed by the authors' failure directly to address Head Start's Achilles heel, the so-called "fade-out effect," whereby the gains made by Head Start children seem to disappear within two years. It has become part of our political mantra to say that Head Start "works," and yet, as the authors point out, the research data is really quite ambiguous about Head Start's long-term impact.

Their recommendations seek to build on Head Start's past successes, to correct past mistakes and to facilitate Head Start's evolution toward a fuller response to the developmental problems caused by poverty:

Increase funding to pay for the expansion of "comprehensive services for multiproblem families." These are needed to address the "major family problems encountered" by program staff: "substance abuse, child abuse, domestic violence, lack of parenting skills on the part of teenage parents, and crime-infested, inadequate housing."

Provide full-day, full-year services, instead of the current largely half-day, part-year program, so that Head Start mothers, who are increasingly long-term welfare dependent, can work or continue at school.

Extend Head Start services to infants and toddlers. Recent increases in funding mean that there will be soon be slots for almost all eligible 4-year-olds, the traditional focus of services. At that point, additional funding can be used to begin serving younger children. "Almost from the outset of Head Start, there has been concern that the program started too late."

To help secure early gains by Head Start children, re-direct Chapter 1 funds toward follow-up or transitional services in the public schools if current research shows that they reduce the "fade-out effect." (Chapter 1 is a federal program providing remedial education for low-income children from kindergarten through 12th grade in the poorest school districts.)

Raise income eligibility for the program to 133 percent of the poverty line, the same as Medicaid eligibility for young children. Zigler and Muenchow would also adjust eligibility for regional discrepancies in the cost of living, for example, between urban and rural areas.

Although there will be much disagreement about particulars, this pace-setting agenda for reform should find a broad following.

One cautionary note: The book often assumes a specialist's level of knowledge about Head Start and related programs, so the general reader may have difficulty following parts of the historical narrative. But this is a minor complaint.

In the years to come, this book is sure to be one of the key texts consulted by anyone wishing to understand Head Start: where it has been, where it is now and where it should be going.

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