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*A Lost Legacy:
Head Start's Origins in Community Action*

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Head Start looks like a publicist's dream come true. The program serves young children who are picturesque in their innocence. Further, Head Start's apparent mission—to help these adorable preschoolers avoid the fate of their impoverished parents—is beyond reproach. In retrospect, it appears inevitable that such a program would catapult to popularity and that it could survive its association with other, more controversial War on Poverty efforts to become the sort of federal effort that politicians in both parties praise. At first glance, the history of Head Start seems to have an unusual fairy tale quality to it.

The actual history of Head Start, though, is more complex than these first appearances might suggest. This is not simply the story of a popular federal program for children, because, in the beginning, Head Start was not simply a program for children. Initially, Head Start aimed at improving whole communities by giving parents and community members new opportunities to participate in the nurturing and education of their children. In its early years the program showed considerable promise as a community action effort. For a time Head Start represented a unique opportunity for poor parents—and especially for poor mothers—to participate in institutional change on the local level. Indeed, Head Start might have become one of the most significant community-level efforts at institutional reform in the second half of the twentieth century had it not retreated from community action. While Head Start's evolution from community

action to child-centered services enabled it to survive hostile forces at the federal level, the shift has tended to obscure some of the initial effects of the program at the local level. This chapter seeks to provide a more comprehensive, gender-sensitive history of the programs origins. To appreciate Head Start's place in U.S. history, one must understand both the program's victories and the cost of those victories.

WAGING WAR ON POVERTY

Head Start was a child of what has become America's frequently scapegoated War on Poverty. The War on Poverty was itself the product of American optimism. Fueling this optimism was an increasing sense among the public that it was immoral for a nation as affluent as the United States to accept poverty in its midst. This idea was the theme of Michael Harrington's influential book *The Other America*. Leading economists reinforced this idea when they asserted that poverty was an economic problem and, as such, it could be controlled through economic policy with statements such as "We can abolish poverty in America in ten years" and "The elimination of poverty is well within the means of Federal, state and local governments."¹ Confidence that poverty could be conquered, combined with the belief that it was immoral to allow it to persist amidst affluence, set the stage for federal action.

On January 8, 1964, in a State of the Union address intended to rally the still-mourning nation, Lyndon Johnson pledged to complete the work John Kennedy had begun. As part of that speech, Johnson declared an "unconditional war on poverty."² This domestic war became official with the passage of the Economic Opportunity act in August of that year. The Act set up a special agency within the office of the president—the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO)—to eliminate poverty in the United States. The decision to create OEO outside the established bureaucracies of the Departments of Labor and of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) was deliberate; War on Poverty supporters believed that a significant problem in the past had been the bureaucracies of the federal departments charged with serving the poor. Accordingly, Congress gave OEO great flexibility in its use of funds and authorized the agency to try a variety of approaches from manpower and training programs to community action efforts that promoted the formation of local coalitions among government officials, local professionals and the poor themselves to identify and address local problems.

Although the economists who had been so optimistic about eliminating poverty saw it as primarily an economic issue, OEO programs did not include income transfers from the rich to the poor. Instead, the War on Poverty utilized a mix of theories regarding poverty, some of which assumed individuals needed help coping with society and others that critiqued society itself. The Job Corps focused on preparing (or even reforming) individuals through training, education, and counseling; programs such as the Job Corps assumed, at least implicitly, that the poor were in some way deficient and that these deficiencies, once identified, could be overcome. Alternatively, OEO's community action efforts promised to involve the poor in making institutions and communities more responsive to the needs of the poor and mobilizing new resources on behalf of the underprivileged; these initiatives provided an implicit critique of existing institutions, rather than of the poor. Community action emerged as a central tenet of the War on Poverty. Believing that existing federal and state institutions, "vested interests," only served to exacerbate poverty, War on Poverty planners sought to "encourage local communities to coordinate their own public and private resources, and to plan and propose their own programs" by providing funds to local communities in a way that bypassed the existing bureaucracies.³ The key to this bypass was locally established community action programs (CAPs) which were to be the catalyst for change. Not only were the CAPs set up outside of the existing welfare structure, but OEO charged that they should encourage maximum feasible participation by the poor in all aspects of their work. Not surprisingly, some CAPs assailed the existing infrastructure; legal assistance services, for example, offered impoverished individuals an opportunity to seek justice from absentee landlords, dishonest merchants, and, in some cases, the local welfare offices that had denied them services. Even when not confronting other agencies directly, community action posed a threat to the existing infrastructure because the community action programs served as a striking alternative to the prevailing model where institutions did things *to* the poor rather than *with* the poor. The community action model suggested that the poor could be involved effectively and, in doing so, prompted a critique of the entire gamut of service agencies—from welfare offices and public hospitals to school systems—where the poor did not have a voice.

OEO's dual approach of addressing both individual and institutional issues reflected conflicting ideas about poverty. While institution changing appealed to activists at the local level and some community action proponents nationally, the media and much of the nation's

political leadership believed that the poor were somehow deficient or *culturally deprived* and that these deficits were passed from generation to generation “in the social genes of the slums,” resulting in a *cycle of poverty*.⁴ The cultural deprivation theory suggested that the poor needed to be educated, to have opportunities to learn the values embraced by middle-class America and that, if introduced to these ideas—most important to the work ethic—the poor would straighten up and act like real Americans. The alternatives seemed clear; the secretary of labor warned that, without such intervention, a disadvantaged youngster’s fate—unemployment, violence, and a life in squalor—was “sealed between the ages of three and six.”⁵

Emerging research in child psychology reinforced the cultural deprivation theory. Psychologists were becoming increasingly critical of the Progressive Era beliefs that a child’s development was predetermined by genetics. Many began paying more and more attention to environmental factors. Indeed, some of these scientists began to argue that IQs were not fixed, that environment could have an impact on a child’s IQ.⁶ Identifying the first five years of life as “critical” to a child’s development, these psychologists suggested that early intervention could reverse a child’s destiny. Their ideas were quickly confirmed by research with actual children; Susan Gray conducted one of the most influential experiments at Peabody College in Nashville where children who participated in a child development program showed an increase in IQs when compared to nonparticipating children.⁷

The combination of public support for the cultural deprivation idea with the research emerging from child psychology suggests that some sort of early intervention program was probably inevitable. Accordingly, some identify this as the origin of Head Start. Social historian Michael Katz argues that Head Start was founded on this idea of cultural deprivation,⁸ and former Head Start administrator Edward Zigler points to the importance of the work in psychology in his explanation of Head Start’s origins. Neither author acknowledges, however, that OEO could enable communities to deliver early childhood services without creating a nationwide program such as Head Start. OEO did not need the Head Start model to fund child-oriented efforts. Indeed, OEO funded preschool education and other services for children prior to the development of Head Start and, in response to congressional interest in these efforts, encouraged communities to develop these kinds of programs for children. OEO’s decision to invent Head Start—to make its efforts among children more visible and more deliberate—had different origins.

Within months of the OEO's establishment, the executive director, Sargent Shriver, faced a crisis. Despite its various advantages, OEO could fight poverty only when it was invited to do so by local communities; especially with respect to the community action program, OEO funded the initiatives that originated at the local level. While participating in the War on Poverty brought additional federal dollars into the economy, it also brought new ideas, and, for some, the risk seemed higher than the reward. Headlines about conflicts in Syracuse and elsewhere highlighted the risks associated with the CAPs, which frequently challenged local authorities. Further, the risks looked unavoidable; at the urging of local activists, OEO withheld funds from the New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Chicago CAPs in 1965 because their structures did not allow for maximum feasible participation by the poor.⁹ Many localities, particularly in the South, did not welcome CAPs or OEO, and, as a result, Shriver had more money in his budget than he could hope to spend the first year. He needed to develop a popular OEO program to help the agency establish itself in those regions of the country where community action was not, by itself, welcome.

Shriver realized the potential for a program for children to overcome the resistance to OEO when he tested the idea of a program for children out on a conservative Washington newspaper correspondent over lunch.

I suddenly realized then that there was another advantage to doing something about children—particularly from a racial point of view. . . . In our society there is a bias against helping adults. The prevalent idea is: "By God, there's plenty of work to be done, and if poor people had any get-up-and-go they'd go out and get jobs for themselves." But there's a contrary bias in favor of helping children. Even in the black belt of the deepest South, there's always been a prejudice in favor of little black children. The old-time term "pickaninny" was one of endearment. It wasn't until blacks grew up that white people began to feel animosity or show actual violence toward them. I hoped that we could overcome a lot of hostility in our society against the poor in general, and specifically against black people who are poor, by aiming for the children.¹⁰

Somewhat accidentally, Shriver hit on what would become a long-term advantage for Head Start: it avoided much of the ambivalence nonpoor Americans felt about welfare programs. By focusing on innocent young children, the program could avoid questions of

worthiness. At the same time, the program circumvented immediate association with the civil rights struggle because it served black children, rather than black adults. By 1965 race was an important issue for OEO; as poverty became increasingly associated with African Americans, white Americans displayed a growing ambivalence about ending poverty. Kennedy's original concern about poverty focused on conditions in Appalachia, not Harlem. By 1965 though, "poverty appeared as an urban problem that most seriously afflicted blacks."¹¹ The stereotype of the poor changed from the "white yeoman staggered by circumstance" in the 1930s to "black welfare mothers with hordes of illegitimate children" in the 1960s.¹²

As Shriver recognized, a program for preschoolers was an opportunity for OEO to fight poverty while circumventing (at least temporarily) the troubling racial questions that made other aspects of the War on Poverty work increasingly controversial. In conceptualizing Head Start, Shriver took advantage of prevailing biases, particularly about children and adults. Rather than addressing the attitudes and institutions that made antipoverty programs controversial—asserting, for example, that a legitimate part of community action was, indeed, helping blacks register to vote—Shriver conceived a program that would be popular because it focused on an impoverished group who was already considered deserving in the eyes of the public. A program for children would be more difficult for communities to resist, and the effort could serve as a wedge for future OEO-sponsored activities.¹³

According to Shriver, he returned to his office after lunch with the correspondent and began talking to staff about designing a program to prepare poor children for school, to take care of their nutrition and health problems, to give them books and toys, to give them a *head start* on their education. In December he asked Dr. Robert Cooke, a physician, to assemble a group of experts to consider the problem of poor children and to recommend a plan of action to OEO.¹⁴

In January, Cooke's committee provided Shriver with its recommendations in a memo entitled "Improving the Opportunities and Achievements of the Children of the Poor."¹⁵ In its proposal the planning committee set forth seven major objectives for the preschool program:

- A. Improving the child's physical health and physical abilities.
- B. Helping the emotional and social development of the child by encouraging self-confidence, spontaneity, curiosity, and self-discipline.

- C. Improving the child's mental processes and skills with particular attention to conceptual and verbal skills.
- D. Establishing patterns and expectations of success for the child which will create a climate of confidence for his future learning efforts.
- E. Increasing the child's capacity to relate positively to family members and others while at the same time strengthening the family's ability to relate positively to the child and his problems.
- F. Developing in the child and his family a responsible attitude toward society, and fostering constructive opportunities for society to work together with the poor in solving their problems.
- G. Increasing the sense of dignity and self-worth within the child and his family.¹⁶

Regarding parents the report noted, "Many of them have deep feelings of love and aspiration for their children which can be capitalized upon in this program."¹⁷ The committee recommended parent participation in planning the center's programming, acquainting other residents with Head Start services, helping center staff to understand the neighborhood, learning parenting skills, and supervising the children of other parents who are participating in center activities; it also noted that parents could fill a variety of "non-professional, sub-professional and semi-professional roles necessary" for operating the center.¹⁸ The committee did not recommend that parents participate in the hiring of staff or in the development of curriculums for the program. It also did not suggest that the program could become a catalyst for community action efforts by these parents, although OEO officials quickly identified this as a goal for the program.¹⁹ The committee emphasized education in parenting in its report, yet four members protested to Shriver that the level of parent participation outlined in the report was too broad and needed to be focused more narrowly on educating parents. Alternatively, the community action advocates in OEO called the recommendations regarding parents weak considering the agency's commitment to real citizen participation.²⁰

The issue of parent participation is central to Head Start. Head Start researchers Jeanette Valentine and Evan Stark argue that there are several conceptions of how Head Start parents should participate in the program, each reflecting a different perspective on poverty more generally.²¹ Program planners who understood poverty as a problem

originating in the individual held a child's parents accountable for the child's condition and, accordingly, tended to support programs that either removed the child from the influence of the deficient parents or worked to improve the parents, for the benefit of the child. Within Head Start, the advocates of this perspective emphasized education in parenting skills and household management as the primary kind of parent involvement. At the other end of the spectrum, those who saw poverty as a systemic issue supported parent involvement in the governing of Head Start centers, the hiring of teachers, and the overall operation of the program, because their goal was to change the way institutions worked, rather than to focus on fixing individuals. Those occupying the middle ground in this debate supported a combination of education and participation in decision making. The combination, they argued, would benefit parents on an individual basis while it increased the legitimacy (and hence the overall effect) of the program in the local community. There has been considerable criticism of this middle ground by OEO critics who suggest that OEO co-opted and ultimately silenced the poor by inviting them into the process without giving them full control.²² The dangers of co-optation are important. In many instances outspoken community activists are less outspoken once they have a job inside the system, and certainly there have been cases where organizations have silenced their critics by putting those critics on the organization's payroll. With respect to Head Start, however, it is equally important to recognize that co-optation represented a middle ground; giving parents limited authority in order to garner their support was less disrespectful than assuming poor children could be saved only if experts intervened to protect the children from their parents.

After the planning committee submitted its report, Shriver and several others met with President and Lady Bird Johnson to discuss the proposal. Immediately taken with the idea, Lady Bird became the national spokeswoman for the program.²³ She launched Head Start at a tea in the Rose Garden following President Johnson's official announcement of fund availability. The tea party—attended by members of the planning committee, leading American women, and a few potential Head Start children—provided the origins for two important Head Start legacies.

First, an aura of respectability surrounded the program. The media covered Lady Bird's tea party on society pages rather than in political columns; from the onset the program was more socially acceptable than OEO's somewhat confrontational community action programs. Wives of congressmen and governors vied for invitations to

the tea, and, perhaps prompted by the actions of the First Lady, their interest remained high. Volunteering to assist Head Start was “in” and respectable. Even Donna Reed, who starred as the ideal mother in a popular television series, praised the program and encouraged local women to volunteer their time at centers as part of a promotional campaign.²⁴

The second trend developing out of the tea was less positive. Remarks by Lady Bird and others implied that poor parents were incapable of raising children properly and that Head Start could—during a few weeks in the summer—work miracles with these children, undoing the terrible damage caused by the children’s parents and the squalid conditions of poverty more generally. Unreasonably high expectations about the ability of Head Start programs to rewrite the lives of children plagued the program for years. Often accompanying these unrealistic expectations was a paternalistic view of poor parents as incapable of doing what was best for their children.

Whether in response to the inherent appeal of a program for children or the respectability and promise of miracles added at the tea, interest in the program exploded as soon as OEO announced the availability of funding. Suggesting the program “captured the Nation’s imagination and enthusiasm,” OEO called the response to Head Start “unprecedented.”²⁵ Concerned that the best applications would come from areas that did not need the program as much as other areas, OEO officials tried to facilitate grants from the most impoverished counties and from areas not served by a community action program by offering various kinds of technical assistance to those areas. Because OEO planned to channel Head Start funding through local community action programs, Head Start facilitated the creation of those agencies in areas previously inhospitable to OEO; this solved Shriver’s original problem in getting communities to accept OEO. These tactics worked. Head Start programs operated in more than two hundred of the nation’s three hundred poorest counties during the summer of 1965. Overall the program served more than 500,000 children in over two thousand centers.

The planning committee originally recommended a program serving 2,500 children and had agreed to increase the recommended size to 25,000 children only after long discussions with Shriver.²⁶ The ultimate size of the program—2,000 percent larger than the committee members thought feasible even under the best of circumstances—astonished them. Shriver likened the explosion of Head Start to the Allied invasion at Normandy; he said OEO saw an opening and “pumped in

the money as fast as we could intelligently use it."²⁷ The quick expansion prompted various planning committee members to become concerned about the quality of the programs across the country. Their concern was legitimate; in the rush of processing applications and assuring that the program would be operational from a logistical standpoint, OEO had neither the staff nor the time to ensure program quality at two thousand centers.

Despite internal concerns about the variation in quality, the program maintained its popularity among the general public and with the president. Before the end of the first summer program, Johnson announced an expansion of Head Start. Beginning in the fall of 1965, OEO funded both summer and year-round Head Start programs, in addition to a follow-up program, which would continue Head Start-style services to some children after they entered the public school system.

COMMUNITY ACTION COLLIDES WITH THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Reflecting public support for the program, Congress initially paid little attention to the inner workings of Head Start. Those who opposed OEO's efforts found other programs to be easier targets than the respectable Head Start program whose volunteers included the wives of their colleagues in Congress. Besides, charges that urban rioters used OEO-funded legal services to avoid being jailed produced national reactions far more urgent and negative than any anxieties about the inconsistent implementation of Head Start goals. For a time, Head Start seemed safe from OEO's opponents in Congress.

Head Start's honeymoon ended in 1967, however, when public school superintendents from across the nation sought to persuade Congress to modify the structure and authority of Head Start. By that time community action programs (CAPs)—the primary OEO-funded bodies at the local level—exerted significant influence over local Head Start programs, just as the CAP officials played a key role nationally. OEO categorized Head Start as a community action program and channeled Head Start grants through CAPs, wherever they existed. In areas where the Head Start program existed before a CAP, the grant was redirected through the CAP once it was established. In these cases the CAP usually delegated the program back to the group who had been running Head Start previously, which, in many cases, was the local school system. The redirection of monies through the CAP meant that CAPs suddenly had a role in school operations, including the hiring of personnel and program planning. School superintendents

across the country chafed over the interference of these community radicals—who lacked educational credentials—and asked Congress to remove the CAPs' authority and move Head Start out of OEO and into the Office of Education where the program could be monitored by educational experts, rather than OEO troublemakers. This effort, and the response it generated from both OEO officials and Congress, is important because it illustrates the existing perceptions about Head Start's potential as a community action program.

In 1967 the House of Representatives entertained an amendment to move Head Start to the Office of Education, and a number of school superintendents testified on behalf of the amendment. The issue also came up repeatedly in the Senate's Examination of the War on Poverty hearings held that same year. The superintendents complained about the difficulties in working with OEO and, more frequently, about inappropriate interference, particularly in hiring decisions, from local CAP personnel; they insisted that Head Start was an educational program and, as such, was the province of educators, not radicals.²⁸ Some superintendents also expressed concern that Head Start had the potential to lower teacher qualifications and thus threaten the future of the entire educational system.²⁹ The superintendents' primary concern seemed to be re-asserting the authority of educational experts in the schools.³⁰

Shriver's response to proposals to move Head Start was insistence that Head Start was a poverty program and a community action program—not merely an educational program. He and other OEO officials testified that Head Start was as much about providing jobs for local community members and changing institutions—particularly educational institutions—as it was about helping children.³¹ Shriver credited the program with creating new alliances on behalf of the poor, noting that “there are people working together who never worked together before, [they] were brought together because of their mutual interest in these children.”³² Reinforcing this position, all OEO publications between 1965 and 1969 included Head Start funding under the Community Action category, along with Legal Aid and various other CAP programs; these publications often referred to Head Start accomplishments in community action terms, measuring, for example, the level of institutional change caused by the program rather than simply the number of children served.³³ Both OEO's testimony and the OEO publications suggest that retaining Head Start was important to OEO officials; as Shriver had hoped, the program was facilitating broader community action efforts at the local level.

While Shriver emphasized Head Start's ability as a catalyst for community action, others interpreted Head Start's effects on the public school systems as direct community action. Repeatedly, members of Congress expressed a hope that Head Start would affect the ways schools operated, and at one point in the hearing a congressman challenged a superintendent to describe what his schools had done to help the poor before OEO came along, implying that all school-related assistance was due to outside pressures, not a commitment to equality among educators.³⁴ Contemporary evidence reinforced the suspicion that the educational bureaucracy did not support the War on Poverty; OEO's first annual report, *A Nation Aroused*, included a long list of groups supporting their effort, and there was not an educational association on the list.³⁵ In the 1967 Senate hearings complaints from school superintendents prompted one Senator to comment, "This is becoming more or less a pattern in our hearings across the country and usually defines itself, at least in my mind, as a fight between the poor people and the power structure."³⁶ For him, the issue was not educational expertise; it was community action. His view lumped the school superintendents' complaints with those from other local bureaucrats who also resented the community action efforts that threatened their authority. This interpretation was echoed in a discussion between Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the Brooklyn, New York, superintendent. Kennedy responded to the superintendent's complaints by noting, "Community action is against the establishment. You and I are part of the establishment, so it is directed against us."³⁷ When discussing the possible implications of moving Head Start with the Berkeley, California, superintendent, one senator went even further in asserting that the public schools reflected local power structures. Responding to the Berkeley superintendent's assertion that "there is only one Mississippi," the senator suggested that local power structures in various other places, including Philadelphia, could threaten the effectiveness of a school-run Head Start program.³⁸

Most school superintendents who testified tried to portray themselves as educational experts who were only concerned about the children in their care, but their lack of concern for the possible complications in moving Head Start suggested other motives to those who viewed public school superintendents as "part of the system" that the War on Poverty sought to change. One of the issues consistently raised in discussions about moving Head Start was the anticipated effect on the programs not operated by public schools. The National Education Association and some members of Congress worried that moving Head

Start to the Office of Education would eliminate the local Head Start programs operated by parochial schools and private institutions.³⁹ At question was whether an Office of Education–operated Head Start would have to follow the guidelines set up for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which provided money only to public school systems.⁴⁰ The question was important, because while public schools operated about two-thirds of the summer Head Start programs in 1967, they operated less than one-third of the full-year programs (which were increasingly popular).⁴¹ Despite the number of programs potentially affected, the superintendents, when faced with this issue, typically asserted that no parochial schools were operating Head Start programs in their district, so the issue was not of concern to them. Such a response tended to reinforce the view that these men were looking out for themselves, not the best interests of the Head Start children across the nation. It also highlighted one of the important differences between the superintendents and Congress; public school superintendents could choose to ignore the issue of parochial schools, but Congress could not.⁴²

Congress rejected the amendment to move Head Start out of OEO in 1967 and, in so doing, signaled at least lukewarm support for Head Start as a community action effort aimed at changing the nation's schools. While hardly a call to arms, the action suggested a possible shift in public attitudes toward educational experts. Beginning in the 1870s leading educators sought to centralize U.S. urban schools and to transfer operational authority away from local neighborhood-type school boards and into the hands of "honest and competent" educational experts. Their efforts were largely successful; by 1920 elite-dominated school boards were the norm in most urban areas and the idea that educational experts knew best was firmly in place.⁴³ Given this history, the school superintendents' concerns about Head Start should not be surprising; they were protesting an emerging threat to their authority over all things educational. In rejecting the superintendents' arguments, members of Congress suggested that the superintendents had much in common with the mayors and local bureaucrats who bristled at community action efforts within "their" domain. What is important, Congress seemed to support the Head Start idea that the community—rather than a small group of experts—needed to be involved in the care and education of its children.

Two examples from Milwaukee, Wisconsin—where both the school system and community-based groups operated Head Start centers—highlight these threats to the experts' authority at the local level. In

1966 OEO began to encourage Head Start grantees to ensure that their facilities were integrated. A Milwaukee study indicated that, like the public schools themselves, the Head Start programs in the public schools were largely *de facto* segregated, often serving only white children or black children rather than both.⁴⁴ Although school officials argued that "it is difficult to persuade Negro parents to send their children to schools on Milwaukee's predominantly white south side," their explanations were problematic given that some Milwaukee centers—most notably the one operated by a community-based neighborhood association in an African-American neighborhood—offered what observers considered to be a well-integrated program from the onset. The local Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) chapter criticized the segregation of public school Head Start facilities and threatened a boycott if Head Start did not eliminate the segregation. Within eighteen months the school system was bussing Head Start students to create better integrated classrooms in a district where *de facto* segregation would continue among all other students into the 1970s.⁴⁵ Pressure from OEO and local activists forced the school board to accept integration in its Head Start program even as the board continued to resist pressure from those same activists for wide-scale public school integration.

Even when Milwaukee's professional educators prevailed over the activists and the OEO, the skirmishes were not painless. In 1967 Milwaukee's school superintendent declined an opportunity to apply for Head Start Follow-Through funds which financed primary grade classrooms based on the Head Start model. The event was noteworthy because Shriver first announced the Follow-Through program at a conference held in Milwaukee where he added that Milwaukee would be an excellent place for such a program to begin. True to his word, Shriver included Milwaukee in the one hundred cities invited to apply for Project Follow-Through.⁴⁶ Both the local CAP and the Parent Advisory Committee—Milwaukee's official Head Start parent organization—encouraged the school system to apply for the funds. Neither group, however, could force an application; the PAC's influence varied from center to center and was probably weakest at the school-run centers. Still, when Head Start parents learned that the superintendent had not applied due to concerns about space, they were outraged and went to the school board to demand an explanation.⁴⁷ An editorial cartoon in a local white paper characterized the situation as a missed opportunity, showing the board and superintendent as village idiots, holding out a tub but missing the Follow-Through funds that fell from

the sky.⁴⁸ Board members echoed this assessment, assuring parents that the system would reconsider its position the following year, if funds were still available. However, the PAC was not persuaded that the decision was simply an unfortunate mistake, especially after the board refused to ask OEO for permission to submit a late application.⁴⁹

The PAC and its supporters asserted that the board and superintendent were demonstrating a lack of concern for the city's poor children. Supported by the local CAP, these parents questioned the board's motives at length. One parent asserted, "We ask for things, simple things that the federal government wants us to have. And what do you do? You are either too late in asking for them or else you don't want to do it."⁵⁰

In a city divided over school integration, these charges against the prosegregation board resonated in the black community. Even though the school system eventually got money through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to operate special kindergartens for low-income children, resentment about the Follow-Through issue lingered. Indeed, when the board announced its plan to pursue ESEA funding, some Head Start parents rejected the plan, asserting that the resulting program would be less comprehensive than a Head Start-type effort.⁵¹ The parents were particularly concerned about the lack of health services under the ESEA version, but it was also true that ESEA funding had fewer requirements about parent and community involvement than the Follow-Through funds from Head Start would have had. By choosing to pursue ESEA funding rather than the Follow-Through dollars the superintendent managed to avoid additional parent "interference" in school functioning.

The House's decision to leave Head Start under OEO's authority in 1967 was all the encouragement OEO officials needed to promote a more activist Head Start model. After 1967 OEO was less sensitive to public school concerns about the program and the lingering desire among some members of Congress to move the program. The fact that schools continued to participate in the program after the 1967 hearings, despite a warning from one superintendent that school boards would withdraw in massive numbers if OEO continued on its current course, also strengthened OEO's position.⁵²

One measure of OEO's newfound confidence over Head Start's status as an OEO program is its approach to parent participation. Prior to the hearings, the September 1966 *How to Apply for Head Start Child Development Programs* publication recommended that parents be

involved in the hiring of each Head Start program's center director, but officials quietly withdrew this requirement under pressure from school systems.⁵³ After the hearings in late 1967, however, Head Start published its first policy manual where parent involvement in decision making topped the list of types of parent participation.⁵⁴ In keeping with OEO's emphasis on program flexibility the manual outlined specific program requirements but left implementation strategies to the discretion of local programs. Regarding parent participation, however, the manual identified requisite structures, termed Parent Advisory Councils, which grantees and delegate agencies were required to establish and utilize. OEO further clarified this structure in the 1969 parent involvement handbook, which clearly identified parent participation in Head Start as community action.

Despite these publications, it is difficult to characterize the overall position of OEO on parent participation. Certainly there is evidence of a struggle within OEO between community action proponents—who saw Head Start as a school reform and community action program—and the early childhood staff who saw Head Start as an educational program. Various individuals involved in Head Start at the national level under OEO have commented on this conflict.⁵⁵ Additionally, early OEO and Head Start publications reflect these conflicting priorities.

Some OEO publications emphasized the role of Head Start parents as community change agents. The 1967 OEO report, *The Quiet Revolution*, proudly reported that Head Start centers were increasingly becoming places where community issues such as housing were discussed.⁵⁶ The OEO annual reports consistently emphasized the community action aspects of Head Start, including efforts to change other institutions and involve parents in decision making within the centers. Similarly, the 1969 parent participation handbook suggested that participation in Head Start policy boards should lead parents to involvement in local welfare and school boards.⁵⁷

Other publications, however, characterized parent involvement as observing and learning rather than as actively participating in decision making. In its outline of the procedure for a diagnostic staffing for a Head Start child, for example, one publication indicated that the parent was not to participate in the staffing or diagnostic process at all; instead, staff were instructed on how to prepare the parent for the diagnosis, after the staffing was over. The publication gave no indication that a parent might have something to contribute to the problem-solving process; instead, it stated that diagnoses were the realm of the professional.⁵⁸ The early childhood experts within Head Start consis-

tently argued that parents needed education and that educating parents would benefit children. Children, of course, were the focus of the early childhood staff members; while the community action advocates believed Head Start's mission was to improve communities, the early childhood staff in OEO saw the program as a service for children. Prone to view the program as a child-saving—rather than community building—effort, the early childhood experts did not believe parents should run Head Start programs without considerable guidance from experts such as themselves.

HEAD START "PARENTS" WERE USUALLY MOTHERS

Gender adds an important dimension to any analysis of OEO's intentions regarding Head Start. Many Head Start publications used the terms "parent" and "mother" interchangeably; the photos and drawings in these publications typically depicted women and children. Head Start teachers were consistently referred to as "she." In fact, a Head Start booklet on the role of the psychologist was unique in that it included photos of men—meeting with other adults, however, not interacting with children. When OEO officials referred to community action among Head Start parents, then—whether they realized it or not—they were generally speaking of community action among women. The gender of these activists is important because, despite the developing women's movement,⁵⁹ ideas about women inside OEO (as in the nation as a whole) were quite traditional. In 1970 Cooke—who led the Head Start planning committee—testified to Congress that taking care of young children "is not a very masculine activity in our society, and I think this would be as degrading for a lower income person as to a middle-income person that their major responsibility is a baby caretaker."⁶⁰ None of those present at the hearing remarked on the irony in Cooke's statement, perhaps because they considered him a man who supervised women caring for children, not a man who cared for children directly.

OEO's 1967 "Women in the War on Poverty" conference provides a fascinating glimpse of attitudes toward women within the agency. Several speakers referred to the "natural" role of women in the effort, emphasizing the nurturing that was needed to assist the poor to become full citizens and downplaying activism among women.⁶¹ Jule Sugarman, associate director of Head Start, devoted his presentation at the conference to calling for program volunteers. Sugarman did not discuss the unique role women played in Head Start or the

opportunities for women's activism within the program, even though some Head Start programs—like that operated by the Child Development Group of Mississippi—clearly relied heavily on female activists.⁶² Still, given the tone of the conference, it is more striking that Sugarman did not talk about Head Start's efforts to improve mothering skills; several other speakers referred to the important role of the mother, one quoting Lady Bird Johnson who said, "When you train a man, you train an individual. When you train a woman, you train a family."⁶³ The conference acknowledged the problem of poverty among women, but, beyond one speaker's comments regarding the wages of domestic workers, there was little attention to the causes of this poverty. Several speakers referred to the fact that women earned less money than men, but no one noted the systemic issues behind this inequality—one of which might have been that women were assumed to be teachers in Head Start while men were psychologists for the program. Indeed, the official conference proceedings provide no evidence that attendees were aware of sex role stereotyping—an idea being addressed by the newly emerged National Organization for Women, along with various grassroots women's organizations.⁶⁴

One thing that remains unclear, then, is how OEO and Head Start officials perceived the activism of Head Start parents, particularly mothers. Was appropriate activism talking about housing conditions at a Head Start meeting or organizing a march through the city to protest housing segregation? Was it acceptable for women to be activists if their actions were on behalf of their children? Indeed, were women supposed to become activists or merely support the activism of men? Conceivably, OEO officials believed that making Head Start a catalyst for change might encourage more men to participate in the program, as leaders of the community-oriented movements originating from the centers. It is more difficult to believe that OEO officials intended Head Start mothers to organize marches and challenge community institutions, given OEO's traditional view of women. Because OEO officials never publicly acknowledged the issue of gender, however, this is speculative.

Another Head Start feature—the use of volunteers and nonprofessional aides in the program—merits attention here since the individuals recruited as paid and unpaid workers were often Head Start mothers or other women from the local community. As with parent participation, one can interpret the practice of providing career opportunities to adults in the impoverished community in several ways. Some Head Start publications suggest that hiring parents to work in the classroom

was a means to demonstrate the effectiveness of "appropriate" child development practices and to convert the parents to Head Start-type parenting. Additionally, officials acknowledged the strategic advantages of hiring community members; they argued that children would be more comfortable with these adults and that the larger community would be more interested in a program that had credible local advocates. For community action advocates, the major benefit of hiring locals was broader. They cited Head Start hiring policies—which essentially created new jobs in low-income areas—as evidence that the program was more than an educational program, that like other CAP efforts it was creating jobs and opportunities for the poor.

The 1968 Head Start policies on career advancement and the Head Start Supplementary Training Program (HSST) reinforced the image of Head Start as a program offering adults new opportunities. The policies required that career plans be developed for each Head Start staff member. HSST promoted college training for Head Start staff members. One of the unique features of HSST was its acknowledgment of special issues facing female employees who sought higher education. HSST negotiated with community colleges to drop entrance requirements (since many Head Start workers lacked a high school diploma), to initiate more flexible degree programs to accommodate single mothers, to give college credit for work experiences, to assist with transportation difficulties, and to experiment with alternative approaches to teaching.⁶⁵ Through the HSST, Head Start addressed the poverty of female-headed households by facilitating career development.⁶⁶

Head Start's policy of encouraging the hiring of local women and encouraging mothers to participate in the classrooms is important given existing ideas about the culture of poverty and what Patrick Moynihan called the "pathology" of female-dominated black families.⁶⁷ Both sets of ideas assumed that, without outside intervention, poor children would become the impoverished parents of the next generation of the poor. By employing parents and local community members as Head Start agents, the program seemed to implicitly reject these ideas. If the child's environment perpetuates poverty and Head Start's role is to break the cycle, it does not make sense to bring the local poverty environment into the Head Start center, whether as paid staff or as volunteers. It made even less sense to give local black women a role in operating the program since this would reinforce the matriarchy that Moynihan identified as part of the problem. On this point parent involvement in program operations is especially critical. While one could argue that the program did not reject Moynihan's ideas explicitly

but rather used poor women as volunteers as a matter of expediency—accepting their labor because it was free—this does not explain why the program allowed poor women to influence overall operating conditions. Head Start—by giving these women a level of authority at a time when “experts” were questioning their authority within the family—was a means of empowerment, regardless of the program’s intent. Still, Head Start empowered women only insofar as it assumed that they did not have to be “retrained” in order to work with or on behalf of their children.

Although most Head Start publications emphasized the importance of training for aides, opinions varied among Head Start advocates. Some community action advocates supported the hiring policy in a way that did seem to reject the idea that the poor were in some way defective. Marian Wright, testifying about the experiences of the Child Development Group of Mississippi’s experiences with Head Start, argued that programs needed “warm responsive bodies who can help teach kids to be free and happy.”⁶⁸ Nothing in Wright’s testimony suggested that local mothers and nonprofessionals were inherently defective due to their poverty. Indeed, she asserted that these nonprofessionals were better suited than college-trained women, echoing the community action notion that institutions and experts could learn something from the poor. More typical than Wright’s view, though, was that of Edward Zigler who criticized OEO’s operation of Head Start in 1969, arguing that an “indigenous” person was not going to be effective with children “simply because he or she is poor and therefore understanding and sympathetic.”⁶⁹ Like the early childhood personnel inside OEO, Zigler argued that poor mothers required training before they could contribute effectively to Head Start centers.

Because even those OEO staff who agreed with Wright’s position seemed to accept traditional roles for women, the promotion of opportunities for employment as well as participation in decision making within Head Start was somewhat problematic. In large part, OEO circumvented the controversy by referring to parent activism, without acknowledging the primacy of women. The most important ramifications of this strategy occurred at the local level where OEO’s lack of support for mother-led activism ultimately undermined its efforts to make Head Start an effective community action program.

A national study of Head Start’s impact on communities affirms that the program was affecting institutional changes at the local level during this time. In the study examples abound of Head Start facilitating the involvement of poor parents in school and community issues.