

The trouble with Direct Instruction

Leading educators denigrate Direct Instruction because it works too well.

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There exists an approach to teaching early reading — an approach called Direct Instruction — that has been shown by research and experience to work very well. Given the track record of this approach, and given the undisputed importance of getting children off to a good start in reading, one might suppose that leading educators would be hard at work implementing Direct Instruction. But this is not the case.

Many of Wisconsin's leading educators ignore Direct Instruction altogether, and others smear it by misrepresentation and ridicule when they speak of it at all. As a result, most K-12 teachers move through their careers learning little about Direct Instruction, despite its record of success in fostering student learning.

One can get some sense of how odd this is by trying to imagine, say, Wisconsin medical schools and hospitals in which the senior staff take no interest in the germ theory of disease and go out of their way to discourage doctors and nurses from making use of the medical practices that the theory implies.

Why would accomplished academicians set aside the norms of precise statement and valid argument in order to free themselves up for trashing Direct Instruction? To grasp the underlying issue, one must know something about how Direct Instruction differs in its assumptions and practices from more informal, student-centred approaches to teaching reading.

In general, student-centred approaches take children's interests as their crucial starting point. They assume that mobilization of those interests via imaginative, age-appropriate activities will be more effective than deliberate, teacher-centred instruction in helping children learn to read.

They discount or deny altogether the importance of phonics instruction, claiming that it is fraught with incon-

sistencies and that it displaces the more important goal of reading for meaning.

In arguing on behalf of school practices informed by these assumptions, proponents of student-centred teaching see themselves as defending something larger than an approach to teaching reading. They believe they are asserting a more general philosophy of education — one validated by its superior measure of respect for the freedom and imagination of young children and for the autonomy of classroom teachers.

It is by contrast with this grandiose, self-congratulatory view of the teacher's task — a view that has in various formulations gained ascendancy steadily during the past 100 years in Canada and the United States — that Direct Instruction looks ugly to many reading specialists and classroom teachers. Not only does it concern itself merely with the small-bore goal of teaching reading. Worse yet, it implies a rebuke to the assumptions defining the exalted status the literacy educators have assigned themselves.

It does not assume that reading is natural, or that the alphabetic principle can be attained merely by exposure to literature, or that context is the primary factor in word recognition, or that skill in decoding somehow stands in the way of thinking and imagining and living a good life.

And yet, despite this heterodoxy, children taught by Direct Instruction do learn to read, and to feel good about it in the bargain. If all that is true, the Direct Instruction people have jumped the gate, as it were; and if they have, perhaps the gate won't look so high after all. Better not to let that news get around. Better to take the Direct Instructors down a peg or two, before they attract widespread notice.

None of this is stated in so many words, of course. In the publications of the International Reading Associa-

tion and the various state associations of reading educators, one finds not opposition per se to Direct Instruction (or the teaching of phonemic awareness or phonics).

Instead, critics voice their 'concerns' about bandwagon movements, about the dangers of an improper emphasis on decoding skills, about the taint of 'commercial interests' and the seeking of 'corporate profits' by people who publish Direct Instruction materials, and about threats of 'interference' in the form of 'instructional mandates' that might be forthcoming from policy-makers who lack a properly nuanced understanding of literacy education.

Whole language literacy, by implication, never was a bandwagon movement; it never spawned any instructional imbalance; and it sprang into the world unassisted by the publishers who sold the whole language materials and the professors who advanced their careers by touting them.

In the realm of education policy, we have grown accustomed to controversy over large issues of governance, school organization, and school finance. As against these issues, a controversy focused on practices in teaching reading might seem to be of little general interest — a squabble about day-to-day operations, marked by posturing among specialists and mind-numbing arguments over technical details.

A glance at the statistics on the costs of remedial instruction will serve to dispel such a view. If Direct Instruction caught on in Wisconsin, the savings on remedial programs would amount to between \$35 and \$107 million dollars every year.

Even more troubling are the serious costs incurred by children who feel inadequate and stupid when they struggle unsuccessfully with reading.

(Adapted with permission from "Direct Instruction and the Teaching of Early Reading," www.wpri.org)