

# A Way to Rescue Poor Kids

By David Ziffer

Imagine for a moment that we have a cheap cure for cancer. Now imagine the medical establishment is doing everything possible to discredit the cure and prevent its use, so doctors who treat (but don't cure) cancer can keep their jobs. Imagine millions of patients continuing to suffer and die because nobody – including most doctors – knows about the cure.

This is a picture of something that's really happening in education. But to understand our almost-unknown educational "cure," you have to know about Project Follow Through (PFT). PFT was the world's largest-ever education research project, conducted between 1967 and 1977 by the U.S. Department of Education. Its results indicate there is a replicable, systematic curriculum that dramatically improves the quality of education in poor urban schools – one that can raise poor urban students' test scores to suburban levels.

But almost no schools are using this curriculum, because our educational establishment has effectively suppressed information about it.

## ***Maintaining Gains***

PFT's purpose was to maintain the gains made by low-income Head Start students after preschool. Rather than simply funding methods that weren't proven to work, the U.S. Department of Education commendably decided to research which curricula and classroom techniques are effective in improving student performance.

PFT researchers selected 180 low-income urban and rural school districts nationwide in which elementary school performance was at approximately the 20th percentile. Nine different educational models were each allocated to some schools in approximately 20 districts, with the remaining schools functioning as controls.

Students were pre-tested to determine initial performance differences between PFT-model schools and control schools, so the final analysis could compensate for initial variances. At the conclusion of the project, two independent agencies were hired to collect and analyze the data. The results were shocking – but to understand why, you have to understand our education establishment.

## ***Opposing Views***

There are two opposing views regarding best classroom practices. In the early 1900s, the prevailing idea was that teachers should thoroughly teach basic skills, which would then serve as the foundation for future learning. But since the 1930s, an alternate view called "constructivism" has dominated. Constructivists believe teachers should "facili-

tate" children as they pursue their own learning. By the late 1960s, constructivism was a "given" in North American teachers' colleges.

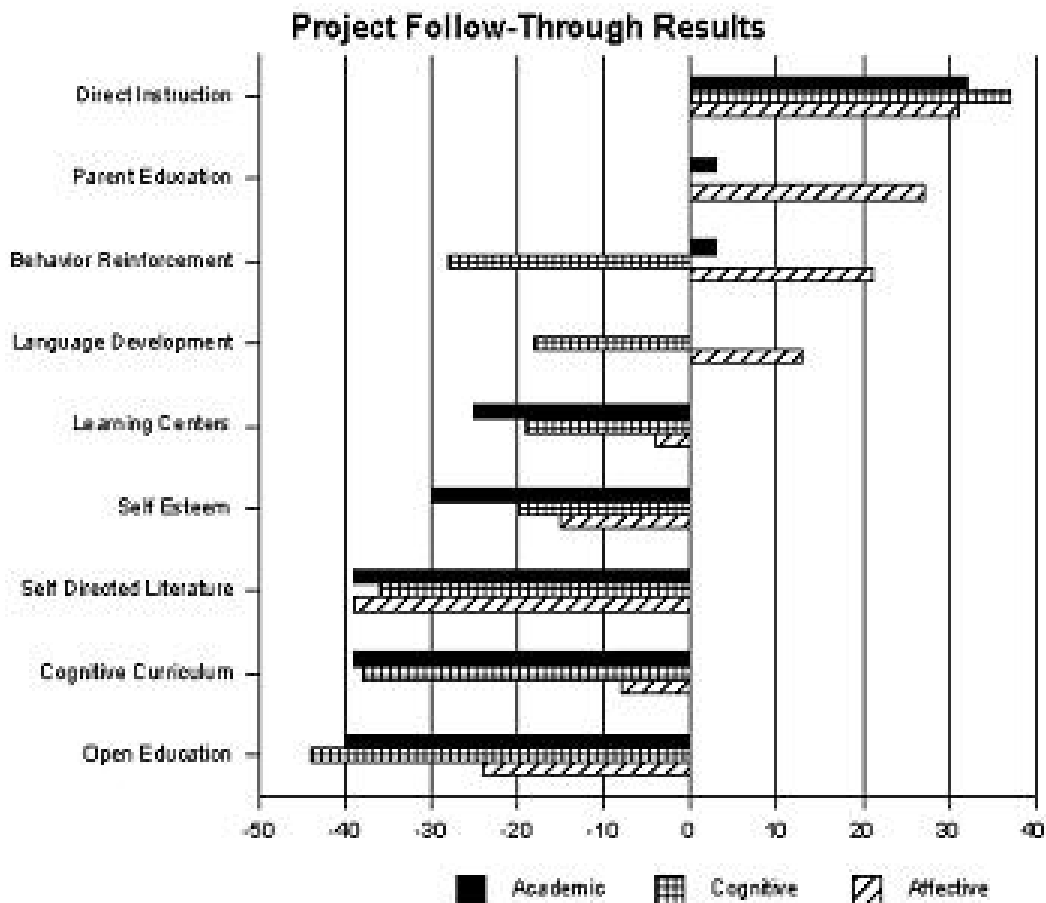
PFT reflected that dominance. Of PFT's nine curriculum models, five were firmly constructivist and three were indeterminate. Only one model – Direct Instruction (DI) – firmly embraced the idea of teaching basic skills.

**Reducing Performance**

Nobody was more surprised than the constructivist curriculum authors when PFT demonstrated two things. First, the basic-skills-oriented DI far outperformed both the control groups and the other models.

Second, the five constructivist-style curricula actually reduced school performance in districts that were already among the lowest performers. DI even outperformed the constructivist models in areas in which they were supposed to excel.

Three tests of success were employed: academic (students' ability to answer questions correctly), cognitive (students' ability to reason for themselves), and affective (students' feelings about themselves).



Note: A missing bar denotes a value of zero.

With names like Cognitive Curriculum and Self-Esteem, the constructivist curricula were supposed to boost higher-order thinking and self-opinion. According to PFT, they actually reduced both.

### ***Hoarding Funds***

With an orthodox ideology and billions of dollars' worth of future revenues to defend, the constructivists responded quickly. The Ford Foundation (one financier of constructivist programs) commissioned an unofficial second evaluation, which used abnormal analysis methods to minimize the enormous performance differences.

That evaluation further sought to discredit PFT by claiming its purpose should not have been to compare models but to study how each of the models works (as if any of the constructivist models had actually worked). Other attackers sought to confuse readers with irrelevant statements, attacking PFT and DI because DI didn't agree with the attackers' own preconceived constructivist notions. One critique, for example, said PFT was invalid because the PFT tests were "more appropriate for middle-class populations" – as if it were inappropriate to expect low-income students to do well.

### ***Maintaining the Status Quo***

The purpose of these attacks was to prevent a mutiny among the constructivist academics running most university education departments, and to retain control of the purse strings at foundations and in the federal government. The propaganda barrage was successful. The PFT constructivists retained the lion's share of the remaining \$500 million the Department of Education distributed to PFT from 1978 to 1995 – which in part explains why today's classrooms are awash in constructivism.

Since PFT's conclusion, DI has been successfully implemented in many districts, but such uses often end quickly under disturbing circumstances. For example, one Rockford, Illinois elementary school using DI from 2001 to 2003 was showing extraordinary results until a new superintendent was hired. Over parents' objections, the DI program was removed, the principal demoted, and her integrity impugned, ironically because of her apparent success.

The claim was typical: The DI results were so good they had to be the result of cheating. Similar stories have played out in other districts. DI is so un-PC that pro-DI teachers and principals literally risk their careers if they implement it.

### ***Silent Treatment***

After the initial barrage of attacks, the constructivists adopted a new strategy: silence. The best news about failure is no news and, unlike their curricula, the constructivists' political strategy works.

You can gauge the success of the campaign of silence for yourself: Ask any teacher or administrator you know about Project Follow

Through, the world's largest education research project, and you'll most likely get a blank stare.

### ***Engineering Defeat***

Since public schools generally do not fear losing funds due to school failure or parental dissatisfaction, teachers and administrators are free to choose whatever curricula and methods they prefer. This is convenient for constructivist curriculum authors, who are generally also professors at influential teachers' colleges. Constructivist orthodoxy is so dominant today it is almost impossible to get a teaching degree at most schools without openly subscribing to it.

Each year, teachers' colleges crank out thousands of teachers and administrators determined to stamp out successful non-constructivist programs, such as DI, in an effort to ensure the continued flow of billions of dollars of grant money and curriculum sales into programs that are proven failures.

PFT's enduring lesson is that people are powerless against the entrenched interests of the education monopoly. Despite our intent to wage a "war on poverty," we have for decades unwittingly financed the engineers of our own defeat.

The only force capable of overcoming our educational dictatorship is the free market. If schools were forced to compete, and if parents were free to choose, entrenched academics would have little say in what gets implemented in our schools – and we wouldn't be spending billions of dollars funding research that teachers and administrators have been trained to ignore.

*(Mr. Ziffer ([daveziffer@projectpro.com](mailto:daveziffer@projectpro.com)) is a school choice activist who operated a Direct Instruction-based after-school reading program from 1997 through 2002. He has no current financial interest in Direct Instruction. Reprinted with permission from the Oct. 06 issue of "School Reform News", published by the Heartland Institute)*