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Teachers' Perceptions of Direct Instruction Teaching

Introduction

Direct Instruction is a series of curricula in language, reading, math, and science published by Science Research Associates, a division of McGraw-Hill. Thirty years of research shows that Direct Instruction—one type of focused instruction—fosters rapid and reliable achievement in students regardless of ethnicity, "race," family background, or socioeconomic status. For example, both large scale and smaller scale experimental research comparing the outcomes of different forms of instruction show that:

1. Children who are taught math, spelling, reading, and remedial reading with Direct Instruction curricula—such as *Reading Mastery* (Engelmann & Brunner, 1995), *Connecting Math Concepts* (Engelmann & Carnine, 1992), *Corrective Reading* (Engelmann, Carnine & Johnson, 1999), and *Spelling Mastery* (Dixon & Engelmann, 1999)—generally outperform (both academically and with respect to self-esteem) children taught with other forms of instruction, such as whole language and "inquiry" methods (Adams & Engelmann, 1996; Becker & Carnine, 1981; Bock, Stebbins, & Proper, 1977; Tarver & Jung, 1995; Vitale, Medland, & Romance, 1993; Watkins, 1997).

2. The early gains of children who were taught some subjects with Direct Instruction are sustained in later grades. For example, Meyer (1984) followed children (predominantly Black or Hispanic) in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn who had been taught reading and math using Direct Instruction in elementary school. At the end of the 9th grade, these students were still one year ahead of children who had been in control (nonDirect Instruction) schools in reading, and 7 months ahead of control children in math. Similar results were found by Gersten, Keating and Becker (1988). Former Direct Instruction students continued to out-perform children who had received traditional instruction. In addition, in contrast to comparison groups of children who had not received Direct Instruction in earlier years, former Direct Instruction students had higher rates of graduating high school on time, lower rates of dropping out, and higher rates of applying and being accepted into college (Darch, Gersten, & Taylor, 1987; Meyer, Gersten, & Gutkin, 1983).

Despite the long history of extensive evaluation research that supports the effectiveness of Direct Instruction curricula, Direct Instruction has not been accepted in American education as either a method of choice or even as an equal partner amongst other curricula, such as whole language and other "discovery" approaches. Part of the reason is that curriculum decisions at school and district levels frequently rest on the extent to which a curriculum or method of instruction connotes feelings, "philosophies," and value orientations that are consistent with those of education professors, district curriculum coordinators, and local teachers and principals, rather than on experimental data on effectiveness (Ellis & Fouts, 1993; Grossen, 1997; Stone & Clements, 1998). A second, and closely associated reason is that many educators have an inaccurate perception of Direct Instruction, borne perhaps of a lack of direct experience with the materials and their classroom applications. For example, many educators believe that Direct Instruction:

1. Is "only for certain children"; e.g., children with special needs or children who are economically disadvantaged. In fact, Direct Instruction works well with all children.

2. Is "drill and kill"; i.e., involves massed practice. In fact, Direct Instruction involves carefully planned distributed practice.

3. Thwarts teacher creativity because teacher-student interaction is guided by scripts in the Teacher Presentation books. In fact, Direct Instruction requires a great deal of teacher creativity in attending to the needs and progress of all students and in designing expansion activities.

4. Focuses only on basic or rote skills. On the contrary, Direct Instruction curricula quickly move from foundational skills to very high level concepts and cognitive strategies. This is evident, for example, in levels III–VI of *Reading Mastery*, in *Reasoning and Writing*, in *Connecting Math Concepts*, in *Corrective Reading: Comprehension*, and even in the pre-k–2 curriculum called *Language for Learning*.

5. Is disliked by teachers and students (Adams & Engelmann, 1996; Tarver, 1998).

The purpose of this paper is to correct some of the myths about Direct Instruction by providing first-hand information on how teachers who are using Direct Instruction actually perceive it. It is hoped that this sort of information will help educators to make more informed curricular decisions.

The Study

Data were collected from all teachers (83) who were using Direct Instruction Curricula (*Language for Learning*, *Reading Mastery*, and/or *Corrective Reading*) in two situations during 1999–2000.

1. Twenty-four teachers from two affluent schools in New Hanover County whose populations served both white children and minority children, many of whom were from economically disadvantaged families. In these two schools there was a large discrepancy in reading achievement on state end-of-grade tests. The two schools adopted Direct Instruction curricula on a small-scale pilot basis in some classes to see how well it worked overall and with respect to closing the achievement gap. Many teachers, used to whole language as the overarching approach to reading, and to *Reading Recovery* as the predominant approach to remedial reading, were reluctant to use Direct Instruction and voiced many of the common myths and reservations. However, these teachers volunteered (were not ordered by their principals) to try the DI curricula.

2. Summer school classes for at-risk children or for children who needed remedial instruction in 20 elementary schools in New Hanover. Summer school was one month in duration and involved 486 students and 59 teachers.

At the end of the summer school program and at the end of the school year, all of the DI teachers filled out an instrument entitled, "Teachers' Self-Assessment of Direct Instruction Teaching." In addition to rating themselves on instructional skills (such as pacing and error corrections), teachers answered three open-ended questions: (1) How has using DI been beneficial for your students? (2) How has using DI been beneficial to you? (3) Can you see yourself using DI in the future? If so, why? If not, why not? Teachers understood that their responses would help to determine whether or the extent to which DI would continue to be used in their schools; e.g., whether after summer school, it would be adopted for classes during the academic year, or whether, in the two affluent schools, it should be used school-wide. Therefore, teachers understood that they were welcome to give negative evaluations. Following are all of the responses of the 83 teachers.

How has using DI been beneficial for your students?

"I feel I am really helping those children that already seem predestined to be 'below level' and 'at risk.'"

"It has allowed them to become self-disciplined, better listeners and more self-confident learners. They are more willing to attack a word."

"I have been impressed with how quickly children can learn with DI. I taught a group of children in *Language for Learning* during the first semester, and they didn't start *Reading Mastery* until just before Christmas. By January, some of these children were only on level 4 of running records, so in one semester, they grew at least 12 levels to level 16. I do think that it is best to start *Reading Mastery* at the beginning of first grade, if not before. If *Language for Learning* needs to be taught in first grade, it should be taught parallel to *Reading Mastery*."

"I've also noticed my children using the skills they learned when reading other materials."

"They are excited about reading, saying, 'Yeah!' when the lesson gets to story section."

"It helps students focus as a group. Teaches them to learn to work together."

"My students appreciate the improvement in their phonemic awareness, word recognition and fluency. They also work better together as a group as a result of DI."

"I think it helps the children mentally because they feel successful and are reading more text; physically because they are moving to and from a group; and emotionally because they are successful with a group of children and not isolated."

"It has vastly improved their phonics knowledge—and transference."

"It not only has helped the children in reading, but their writing in their journals has been great!!"

"I really like the program. I felt it left no gaps in learning. Covered great material. Consistent and successful."

"I have seen positive growth in students who had very little self-esteem. It has been wonderful to witness."

"Increased vocabulary and skills increased, for example, decoding."

"I definitely see reading scores that have improved."

"It helps the children focus and practice good listening skills."

"It is a good tool for students with attention problems. The material in the comprehension book had many lessons that complemented our classroom curriculum."

"I have charted the growth of these students and I have been very pleased with the progress. All children did learn to read."

"I feel that DI has been beneficial to my students, because some of my non-readers are starting to gain the skills necessary to become readers. The students have expressed to me how good it feels to be able to read words. They truly look forward to their DI group time."

"Better listening skills, can follow directions much better, reading skills improved, writing skills much improved, better group skills, and bet-

ter recall of materials and ideas learned."

"They seem to have gained a great deal of self-confidence through these lessons. They now listen more carefully and seem better able to understand certain concepts (i.e., analogies, synonyms, classification) much better."

"DI has allowed my students to read!!! They can sound out words and have the confidence to even try. I see a major difference in the DI students from this year and students reading in previous years without DI."

"DI is beneficial to students because it finally brings phonics back to reading!"

"Poor readers need many tools to figure words, and DI brings the needed decoding. It teaches the children using positive reinforcement techniques, to replace their poor reading habits with successful habits."

"Students really do seem much more aware of the phonemes in words and the blending process."

"They understand now that all are expected to learn and to participate."

"DI has enabled my non-EC students to experience success through sequential activities and controlled text. EC students were getting this previously. It has allowed many borderline students to explode in their overall abilities and self-confidence."

"My students have greatly benefited from DI. They know letter sounds, can differentiate between letters/words/sentences. They are beginning to blend sounds and transfer to other activities (writing)."

"DI has helped my at-risk-reading students immensely. Each one of the DI students in my class was at least on level 16 running record level by the end of the year. Level 16 is the at-grade-level point for first grade, so every child in my class can read at grade level going into second grade!"

"DI has helped with confidence and improved reading and writing skills."

"The students enjoy reading! They are learning how to decode as well as various spelling patterns. They are much more proficient at both. They really enjoy the stories. Their reading pace has picked up as well. It has given the children structure and routine to their reading."

"They feel successful. They've learned 'rules' to apply during word attack portions of the lesson. They look forward to the lessons."

"DI has given my students more confidence in reading, ex. sounding out words, not embarrassed to do so, follow along with finger when reading, overall confidence in attitude with group."

"Most of the children have improved their reading level. The children have a lot more confidence in themselves."

"The students and teacher bonded during our direct instruction. The methods of instruction can be incorporated throughout the instructional periods during the school day."

How has using DI been beneficial to you?

"It has kept me very organized and helps make a more accurate assessment of the students. Provided me familiarity with the program. Daily interaction with students in an instructional rather than administrative role."

"DI is the program I've been waiting for over my entire career of 27 years! I have always believed that repetition and high child involvement were keys for reading, especially for children having difficulty, but DI is the most efficient method I've seen."

"It has given me another resource tool to teach reading, comprehension, and writing."

"This program is good for the children who are below grade level and gives them a chance to be successful."

"I was able to see in the smaller setting specific behaviors in children not noticed in a larger setting and concentrate on changing those behaviors that were obstacles to their learning."

"It has been a sequential, organized program, building on the skills. It required children to be attentive."

"DI has been beneficial to me because all the materials that I need for planning are in the presentation books. Also, the goals/objectives are located in T.G., which makes it easier to write my IEP's."

"I loved the reading series presented with DI. I am better at keeping group attention and recognizing specific problems our children had. My skills as educator improved, especially my listening skills and presenting skills. Not only for DI but other subjects as well."

"It has helped me see problems associated with comprehension and has taught me different ways of teaching skills and approaching problems."

"DI has been beneficial to me with personal satisfaction in seeing growth and improvement for children who struggle with reading."

"If my children benefit, I benefit! It has helped me make certain that every individual child is held accountable."

"DI has been helpful in discriminating between at-risk learners who needed something different and those who need something different and much more (i.e., specifically designed instruction!)."

"DI has accomplished what I could never have done on my own—convinced teachers that effective research based reading practices (those that DI is based on) work!"

"Easy planning! Smooth transitions."

"I enjoyed working with a small group and watching their growth."

"It had given another way to approach how to teach reading. All children don't learn the same way nor need the same approach. This is an easy to learn program to teach with some great strategies for producing strategic readers."

"It has helped me to understand the need for structure in groups. It has also given me the chance to work with low achieving groups and to better understand their needs."

"I feel like I've helped these children learn to read better and enjoy reading as well as improve their self-confidence and self-esteem."

"I am an assistant, and it has been very beneficial with teaching sounds and reading words. I like the repeated use of DI for myself and I have taken DI to my classroom. I see it beneficial in my class for those that are not in DI groups."

"I have enjoyed seeing my children progress in their reading. It's a joy to see the children feel more confident in themselves, and see that their reading has improved so much. They can read now!"

Can you see yourself using DI in the future? If so, why? If not, why not?

"I loved it!! I saw more growth and felt as if I accomplished something every day!"

"I am excited about using the program in my regular classroom situation. I have seen the progress that my children made in summer school in a matter of 18 days."

"It provided me with a structured way to teach phonics/decoding. I spent less time planning."

"I will use DI in the future. The children like the lesson and followed along very well. I feel that they learned how to form sentences and follow directions as well as how to stay on task."

"Yes (I can see myself using DI in the future). I feel like the program can benefit a large number of students with different learning styles."

"I've been able to use aspects of DI in my other lessons."

"I would like to use DI in the future with my students in addition to other reading programs."

"Already I catch myself using some of the structure of DI in other subjects. It really works out well."

"Yes, yes, yes!! The students were successful, confident, and proud!!!"

"I can see myself using DI in the future because it really works."

"Definitely! It is a great way to present skills in a sequential manner that does not assume skills are already present."

"Yes, however, for many of my students I need to allow more time to supplement the curriculum with phonemic awareness skills and spelling as well as additional work in comprehension."

"Yes! It works!"

"Yes, I think it has been beneficial to the students."

"Yes! It has worked. I don't believe every child needs it, but those with reading difficulties or that are 'on the fence' can benefit from the program greatly."

"Yes. I think the *Reading Mastery* program helps the children get a better understanding for reading. I like to use the signals and verbal usage to get kids on task."

"Yes, I love it! It works and I enjoy the program."

"I would hope that DI would continue here at ....."

"Yes! because DI is great for the kids. They learn how to read when we use DI."

Comments Suggesting Difficulties

Out of all of the comments, only five comments suggested difficulties. For example,

"I found the children had a hard time waiting for the signal... They had to develop listening and watching skills..."

"I feel their attention spans are too limited for this."

"Children complained about so much repetition."

These comments reflect improper placement. The children referred to in the first two comments had been placed at too high a level; they did not yet have the skills needed for effective participation. Students referred to in the third comment had been placed at too low a level. They did not need the repetition. Ordinarily, these misplacements would be caught early in a school year and corrected. However, given the short duration of summer school, these misplacements could not be detected until summer school was nearly completed.

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AMY GRIFFIN, ADI

ADI Awards Given

One of the important roles ADI fills is the fostering of a "DI community." The Board of Directors develops this community through various activities, among them a recognition program for practitioners of Direct Instruction. Each year at the National Direct Instruction Conference there is an awards dinner celebrating the achievements not only of DI users but also students and entire schools. Following is a summary of the recipients of the ADI awards for the year 2000.

Excellence in Education Awards

Anayezuka Ahidiana is one of four recipients of an Excellence in Education Award for teaching and teacher/training. It is a shared feeling when Ed Schaefer of Educational Resources, Inc. says that, "Anayezuka has dedicated her life to improving the educational opportunities of children and their teachers." Ahidiana has used the various DI programs as primary tools in improving the lives of students, teachers, and administrators. Schaefer feels so strongly about the impact Ahidiana has on students lives he says, "Given the students she taught so well, the teachers she has trained so thoroughly, and the schools she has lead so competently; there are or will be literally thousands of men and women whose life's realizations may now match the expectations of their dreams and the promise of this country."

The phrases "total commitment," "tireless energy," "devoted," and "on task" appear repeatedly in the recommendations from her colleagues and Bernice Welchel, Principal of City Springs Elementary in Baltimore, MD says that, "Anayezuka has helped to change the entire culture of our school from one that did not believe that students can and should learn to their maximum potential to a school that beams with pride when students move from one mastery program to another."

Anayezuka Ahidiana

Ahidiana not only transforms the lives of students she teaches but as her nominator Paul McKinney says, "I have personally watched her turn the attitudes and beliefs of many 'hard to teach' teachers around. Because she believes that learning is a lifelong habit, Aneyezuka continues to hone her teaching and training expertise by attending many of the DI conferences and training sessions conducted by ADI and SRA."

In sum, the words of the team of coaches at City Springs Elementary perhaps most clearly express the extent of the gratitude felt by those who work with and benefit from the spirit of Ahidiana. "She serves as a mentor to all of the coaches—a constant source of inspiration, support, encouragement, and motivation. She is an excellent trainer; she is thorough. The level of respect that our school family has for Ms. Ahidiana