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AUTHOR DiChiara, Larry E.
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the mindset of educators regarding reading instruction and attempts to raise consciousness as to how reading can be better taught in United States schools. It calls for the need to go beyond the status quo and to allow for an honest, critical evaluation of the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of current instructional practices. It identifies key concepts and strategies that research indicates are necessary for a successful Language Arts program and for the transfer of certain skills to all students. A sense of urgency is expressed in order to illustrate the need for expedience in identifying students who are experiencing reading problems and, more importantly, in identifying the instructional practices that are the root cause of these problems. In addition, the need for quality assurance in our schools is upheld and expounded upon. The components and underlying beliefs of Direct Instruction (DI) are described as well as an overview of a DI program. The paper makes recommendations for adopting DI as a purposeful step toward increasing quality assurance in classrooms and providing teachers with the necessary tools and training to implement an effective Language Arts program. (Contains 8 references.) (Author/CR)

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# Effective Reading Instruction: Shattering the Myth

Larry E. DiChiara

Coordinator of Administrative Services

and Curriculum and Instruction

Lee County Board of Education

P.O. Box 120

Opelika, AL 36803-0120

Office Number: (800) 652-9770

Office Fax Number: (334) 745-9822

E-mail Address: ldichiar@comail.lee.k12.al.us

Effective Reading Instruction: Shattering the Myth

Abstract

The author examines the mindset of educators regarding reading instruction and attempts to raise consciousness as to how reading can be better taught in U.S.schools across the country. He calls for the need to go beyond the status quo and to allow for an honest, critical evaluation of the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of current instructional practices. The author identifies key concepts and strategies that research indicates are necessary for a successful Language Arts program and for the transfer of certain skills to all students. A sense of urgency is expressed in order to illustrate the need for expedience in identifying students who are experiencing reading problems and, more importantly, in identifying the instructional practices that are the root cause of these problems. In addition, the need for quality assurance in our schools is upheld and expounded upon. The components and underlying beliefs of Direct Instruction are described as well as an overview of a D.I. program. Recommendations are made for adopting Direct Instruction as a purposeful step toward increasing quality assurance in our classrooms and providing teachers with the necessary tools and training to implement an effective Language Arts program.

Changing the Mindset of Educators

Would it be accurate or presumptuous if I were to claim that the ability and, conversely, inability to read affects every fiber of a child's educational body? Think about it: If a student is unable to read, his or her mathematical abilities are affected, along with capacities in science, social studies, and all subjects--negatively and forever impacted by illiteracy. For the illiterate child, self-esteem suffers, extra-curricular participation is eliminated or curtailed, drop-out rates are increased, referrals to special education are escalated, crime rates rise, quality of life diminishes: menial jobs, low pay, and so forth become the template for a lesser life. College-level education, for all practical purposes, is out of the question for students who cannot read. If you agree that the inability to read can have devastating consequences for children and adults, if the ability to read is that important, then why in our schools do we treat reading just as we do other subjects? And, more importantly, why are teachers allowed to continue teaching reading however they may choose, especially in cases where their methods prove ineffective and their techniques contradict research-based, time-tested, and effective practices?

As a central office level administrator, former elementary principal, and special education teacher of 18 years, I often wonder where the quality assurance is in our schools. I also wonder why it is that we continue to teach reading the same way that it has been done for decades. During the Agricultural Age, there was a necessity for students to be out of school for three months during the summer in order to tend the farms and to work the fields during harvest. However, today less than 3% of American adults work in production agriculture

(Rauhauser & McLennan, 1995). So, why is it that we still continue to give students an extensive summer vacation when research shows that students typically forget much of what they have learned? This example is not being used to advocate year-round schools, but rather to illustrate our reluctance to change entrenched patterns in education and our desire to maintain the status quo, despite what the research pleads with us to do.

## Current Instructional Practices

There is no greater need today in education than to focus on effective instructional practices, particularly reading instruction. As I travel across the country speaking to teachers, I often ask the question, "Why do you teach reading the way you do?" It never ceases to amaze me the variety of answers this elicits ranging from "I teach the way I do because this is the way my university taught me to," to "This is the way the person that I did my student teaching taught it, and I simply copied it," to "I teach reading the way I do because this was the way that I was taught it when I was growing up," to "I just take the basal program that is handed to me and simply go with it." Obviously, this inconsistency and haphazardness of instructional practices does not bode well for young learners when teachers themselves admit that they are not even sure why they teach reading the way they do. Typically, the methods utilized by novice teachers model the philosophy of his/her teacher-training program, an influential professor, or an over-zealous supervising teacher who, with the "gift-of-gab," can so easily convince an eager-to-please student-teacher that this is how reading should be taught.

The Alabama State Department of Education recently established the Alabama Reading Initiative, which is a grass-roots effort to examine current instructional practices and to

reform models across the state. Dr. Katherine Mitchell established a state reading panel, conducted months of research, developed training modules, and spearheaded a state-wide training effort in which I participated. Dr. Mitchell relayed to me that as she interviewed teachers from across the state, she often asked, "How many of you felt prepared to teach reading when you received your first teaching assignment?" Invariably, over 90% of the teachers indicated that they did not feel prepared. Many admitted that they felt as though they learned from "trial by fire." They confirmed what we suspect happens in most schools: We hand new teachers their materials and basals and say, "Go forth and teach! We assume that you know how, and trust that you will do a good job!" Some do a good job, many of them do not.

I once illustrated this diversity in instructional competence by showing a group of educators a graphic that projected a traditional bell-shaped curve. I explained that just as we have students that are dispersed throughout the bell-shaped curve, we too have teachers in our schools that fall on the curve in much the same way! We have those teachers that will fall at the 5th stanine and above, while others will remain stagnant below the 5th stanine. It is important that educators have the courage to recognize and admit that, as with a typical classroom of students, we also have schools that consist of teachers who perform at the low, below average, average, above average, and high range. The unfortunate reality is that there are even principals across this country that purport to be "instructional leaders," but who, often, do not recognize effective (or ineffective) reading instruction or instructors. As seldom as principals are able to get into the classroom and know what to look for, how can there

possibly be genuine, guaranteed quality assurance?

Obviously, a multiple-modality approach to teaching reading, one that utilizes a variety of methods and techniques that take into consideration the individual learning styles and unique needs of children, would seem to be one blueprint for effective reading instruction. What many fail to realize is that children go through various phases as they progress on the journey to literacy. What method of instruction is appropriate and effective in one phase may not be appropriate and effective in another. Typically, reading instruction is fragmented, inconsistent, and incomplete. This should not be a surprise since even the experts cannot agree as to what constitutes effective reading instruction or what the essential components of a literacy program should be! Should it be whole-language? Should it be phonics? Should it be rote-learning? Should it be computer-based learning? Should we utilize Montessori methods? Should it be a combination of methods? If so, what should that magical combination consist of and how much of each component is necessary? Despite the choices, and the passionate arguments that invariably persist, the fact remains that there are methods of instruction that are being used in our classrooms that are weak and so do not work. At the same token, there are methods of instruction that do work and are research-driven, but are not being utilized as much as they should. These methods need to be considered, analyzed for merit, and possibly made available to teachers and teacher-trainers.

## Points to Ponder Regarding Effective Practices

Since there seems to be no real "rhyme or reason" or consistency among teachers and teacher-trainers, I will offer a few points to ponder in regard to current instructional practices.

As one should be able to easily discern, "common-sense" and logic is a theme among the points. I will begin by asking a few questions: Would it not make sense to utilize methods, techniques, strategies, materials, and sequencing that have been researched, field-tested, stood the test of time, and proven to be effective in comparative studies? Would it not make sense to provide teachers with a system that they can believe in, to refine, and to improve upon? One that builds the teacher and the child's self-esteem as a result of success? For example, consider the basketball programs at Kentucky and Indiana. Even when the talent level is down, they still win year after year. Why? Because they have a system in place that has been proven to work. They instill in the players a philosophy and method, and, more importantly, a belief that they will be successful if they learn and implement the team's "system." They give the players and coaches something to "hang their hats on," so to speak. Would doing the same with teachers be less successful?

When one goes to work at the local small-engine plant (Briggs and Stratton), the new employee is not handed a bag of engine parts and told to go put the engine together any way that he or she chooses. The new employee is trained on the researched and field-tested process of assembling the parts in a particular order, that in a timely fashion produces an engine that has a high probability of running, with built-in quality assurance. What we essentially and typically do with teachers is hand them a bag of materials, tell them that they are basically on their own, and send them out with the instruction to produce kids who can read. In this case, quality assurance is either minimal or non-existent. This form of educating teachers and children should be unacceptable, yet we allow it to continue.

## Research and Early Intervention

Research shows that if schools delay intervention until age 7 for children who are experiencing reading difficulties, 75% will continue to have difficulty. If these reading problems are identified in the 1st or 2nd grade, 82% of the time they can be remedied. If we wait until the 3rd or 5th grades, only 46% of the time, can these problems be remedied (Lyon, 1993). If a child has not learned how to read by the time he or she leaves the 6th grade, that student is in big trouble, because formal reading instruction typically stops, with regular students, after the 6th grade! Those students who have not grasped the essential concepts and reading strategies are typically the ones who get referred for special education, drop out of school, become discipline problems, or simply "fall through the cracks." At this point, some schools attempt a multitude of remedial efforts to "catch up the students." The unfortunate reality is that these children must wear this special education label for the remainder of their educational lives due to inadequate or ineffective instruction. As a former Director of Special Education, I recognize that legitimate disabilities do exist, however I believe that more than half of the students are mis-identified and hence wrongly labeled. The sad reality is that we can take these same students and provide some intense, effective reading instruction to raise their reading levels three-fold in a relatively short period of time, and watch as their mental retardation or learning disability dissolves. What happened? Was their disability cured? Did it simply disappear?

One reality that we all need to be thinking about is that while we may be successful in raising the reading level of a child, there will still be a knowledge gap that exists. During the

span of years when a student cannot read, he or she is gaining knowledge only from what is heard or seen. Students who can read during this same period of time are gaining knowledge from what they hear, what they see, and from what they read! Because of this developmental difference in knowledge acquisition, a knowledge gap will inevitably exist that is very difficult to compensate for. For example, often the reading levels of students in high school are several levels below their current grade level. A very intense remediation program is implemented, and the reading level drastically improves in a relatively short period of time. Despite this success, the knowledge gained during this remediation period is negligible. That is why we must understand the sense of urgency. As we delay, not only do these students' reading levels lag behind, access to a body of knowledge is diminished or even denied. Too often educators, as well as the public in general, tend to forget about this secondary effect and consequence of not being able to read.

Early learners walk into a classroom with literacy experiences that range from adequate to non-existent. Some have parents and resources at home, while others do not. Automaticity is a research term that permeates the literature. Researchers have found that when a new concept (such as the short vowel sound of "a" ) is introduced in school, the average child must be exposed to this concept at least 30 times before it becomes automatic to the child. Some children do not need 30 exposures, while other children need more than 30. During workshop sessions, at this point, I typically say to teachers, "Okay, raise your hand. How many of you, when introducing a new concept, keep count of how many times you are exposing your students to the new concept?" Needless to say, very few teachers raise their hands. They

typically smile with embarrassment. I usually follow by admonishing them for "not giving the kids a fighting chance!" If the teacher believes the concept of automaticity to be accurate, then why would he or she not make sure that the literacy program in operation in the classroom guarantees that the students will be exposed to the new concepts and strategies more than 30 times? A teacher would appear negligent otherwise! Would this not begin to explain why some kids seem to acquire the necessary skills, while others need more time and exposure? Maybe this is why, by the end of every school year, teachers always seem to have that group of five or six students that just "don't seem to get it!" We then send these students to the next grade, and the failure cycle continues and typically exacerbates too because the child and/or family is often perceived to be at fault. When a child acquires reading automaticity, he or she can read fluently accompanied with comprehension. According to Paul (1996):

> When we first learn to walk, ride a bicycle, or drive a car, it takes our full attention and concentration to just manage the basics. If we are distracted for even an instant, we lose control. That's the case when a skill is not yet automatic. After enough practice, though, the brain can handle the skill effortlessly, unconsciously, which in turn frees us to look around, enjoy the ride, to think. It is the same with reading. If we are struggling to just sound out the words, if we are hesitant readers, the brain is unable to handle the next stage of reading, which is comprehension, constructing meaning from text (p. 8).

## Phonics vs. Whole-Language

Educators have basically gone full circle in regard to phonics, whole-language, and

back to phonics. Neither method of instruction or pedagogical approach should stand alone and be mutually exclusive, yet young teachers believe that it is either one or the other. Whole-language is predicated on the belief that children's language learning is supported and extended through social interaction and active involvement in authentic and meaningful experiences. Advocates believe that children learn language holistically by integrating acquired knowledge with that which they already possess. By exposing children to a variety of experiences and demonstrations of effective learning strategies, they will acquire these strategies and will eventually become effective readers. Theoretically, these students will obtain an appreciation and love for reading that will last a life-time. Unfortunately, research has recently concluded that many "whole-language" students fall short in the acquisition of basic skills, and experience life-long reading difficulties unless remediated. I have always said that whole-language is good for kids who already know how to read! However, somewhere along the line, the phonetic code must be taught. I do not believe that whole-language advocates ever intended for phonics to be totally eliminated from a child's language arts program, yet this seemed to be what has happened.

In theory, whole-language sounds convincing and logical, but just as it is with Morse Code, I can teach you an appreciation of Morse Code, conduct a thematic unit on Morse Code, use Big Books pertaining to Morse Code, but until I teach you what those dots and dashes stand for, you will never be able to read and understand Morse Code! What good does it do when that young learner can sing the ABC song, but without a clue as to the sound that the alphabetic letters make and how to use them to create blends and ultimately words? One of

my colleagues often says to teachers who rely exclusively on whole-language, "I'll make a deal with you. I'll allow you to teach my child how to read using whole-language methods and techniques, if you will allow me to teach your child how to swim using the same!"

With teachers, I have often used the example of the potential heart-transplant-patient who has to choose between a surgeon who will use the whole-language method of surgery and one who will use research-based, field-tested, medical procedures. Medical malpractice attorneys would swarm our hospitals if the first choice were the most often selected. Is there such a thing as educational malpractice? To avoid any misunderstanding, I need to emphasize that it is not my intention to undermine the use of whole-language instruction. I do believe that whole-language should play a role in language arts programs. I simply do not believe that it should play a major role until after students have acquired the skills and strategies necessary for successful independent reading.

## Background on Direct Instruction

One very successful way of balancing the curriculum and helping children to acquire these literacy skills and strategies is a method of instruction known as Direct Instruction. Direct Instruction has its theoretical origins in the behavioral systems family and has a technical orientation and world view. It is a system of instruction that is backed by years of field studies and research on effective teachers and successful practices. The instructional design is predicated on the belief that all children can learn and will do so if each task is analyzed and broken into smaller, minute tasks and taught sequentially. Activities and lessons are designed so that each of the essential components are mastered and then "piggy-backed"

with the next sub-component that then leads to the required learning necessary before advanced learning is achieved. Direct Instruction falls under the behavioral systems family model mainly because the methods and techniques utilized emphasize traditional behavioral principles, such as task analysis, modeling, reinforcement, feedback, guided practice, repetition, successive approximations, and independent practice (Joyce & Weil, 1996).

Direct instruction was developed by Siegfried Engelmann at the University of Illinois in 1964. He and his colleagues conducted field tests over several years, and with a variety of subjects. This method of instruction was the offspring of DISTAR which stands for Direct Instruction System for Teaching Arithmetic and Reading. In Project Follow-Through, the largest study of instructional practices ever conducted by the federal government, a variety of teaching methods were examined. It was concluded that no method was more effective than Direct Instruction (Adams & Engelmann, 1995). Zig Engelmann later moved to the University of Oregon where he continued to revise and fine-tune his techniques with data and feedback from various teachers and research studies. While conducting his research at Illinois and Oregon, others, notably Doug Carnine, Craig Darch, Wesley Becker, Edward Kameenui, and Russell Gersten, also made contributions to Direct Instruction through their own research. All contributed to Engelmann and others' work to develop D.I. into the method that it currently is today. Craig Darch later moved to Auburn, Alabama to head up the Learning Disabilities Department at Auburn University where he remains today. My initial information about and subsequent knowledge of Direct Instruction came about through my association with this faculty member.

## Major Concepts of Direct Instruction

Direct Instruction is a systematic, highly structured, uniquely sequenced, empirically-based philosophy and method of instruction that leads students to mastery in an extremely efficient manner. Though Direct Instruction techniques are used to teach a variety of subject areas, reading instruction is where a majority of research and field studies have been conducted. Naturally, D.I. reading instruction consists of phonics and phonemic awareness since breaking a task (or word) into minute parts (or sounds) is the cornerstone of the design.

According to Joyce and Weil (1996), Direct Instruction has an academic focus, a high degree of teacher direction and control, high expectations for pupil progress, and a system for managing time. It is considered to be one of the most regimented and efficient methods of instruction available today. Toys, manipulatives, and games are actually de-emphasized in this instructional setting because the use of non-academic materials and dialogue diverts student focus from the academic task, which negatively effects student performance and achievement. A major goal of Direct Instruction is to maximize student learning time. This seems to be especially necessary and appropriate if a teacher has the task of teaching students who have disabilities, who are identified as at-risk, or who simply have fallen behind. Also, built into the program is high student on-task rates and high student success. This is especially important in building student confidence, which is typically at low levels or non-existent in students who have experienced reading difficulties in the past.

There are specific correction techniques that are a mainstay of the D.I. design in order to increase the positive affect and to minimize or eliminate criticism of the student. The

lessons are scripted which provides the teacher with a blueprint, contributing to the efficiency and quality assurance of the program. It is important to note that Direct Instruction principles and techniques have evolved over time and have experienced changes, transformations, and improvements as numerous field tests and research studies in classrooms across the country have taken place. Direct Instruction advocates also boast that D.I. has a history of having been studied for many years. In other words, it has "stood the test of time." One of the constants that remains with the use of D.I. is that student academic achievement almost always increases.

## Direct Instruction: Method of Presentation

A Direct Instruction lesson can be broken down into five basic phases: Orientation, Presentation, Structured Practice, Guided Practice, and Independent Practice. In the Orientation phase, a framework for the lesson is provided. The teacher clarifies the learning task and student expectations. In the Presentation phase, the teacher explains the new concept or skill and provides demonstrations and examples. In the Structured Practice phase, visual representations of the task are used in order to guide students through the practice activity while utilizing visual examples, such as overheads. In the Guided Practice phase, students work semi-independently after the teacher has thoroughly covered the skills and concepts and is assured of understanding. During this time, the teacher is assessing student performance, providing corrective feedback, offering suggestions, and determining future courses of action if re-teaching, additional practice, or re-grouping is necessary, or if pacing of the lessons or activities need to be adjusted. In the final phase, Independent Practice, students work

independently if it is determined that 85% to 90% of the students have achieved mastery. Although teacher feedback is delayed, all practice work is checked, and corrective feedback provided, if necessary. During this time, the teacher focuses on rate of accuracy, student retention of concepts and skills, and the development of fluency.

Through various studies, the research has confirmed that a Direct Instruction program offers features and benefits that are consistent with recognized and essential components of a successful language arts program and accompanying methodology. A sampling of these features and benefits of Direct Instruction have been outlined below, as described by Gersten, Woodward, and Darch (1986):

Features and Benefits of Direct Instruction:

- Shifts emphasis from the child's problem to performing the task. More is learned in a given time. Progress is more meaningful and can be monitored more easily.
- Every task the child is asked to perform is taught directly by the teacher. Learning is not left to chance.
- Teacher models by illustration, not simply by explanation. Instruction is more efficient; it is easier for the teacher to teach and the child to understand.
- The teacher uses precisely laid-out lesson plans, which use similar presentation formats for similar tasks. All critical components are taught. Less preparation time is involved for the teacher, freeing up teaching time. The consistent use of instructional language makes it easier for the child to follow.

- Signals are used to initiate a group response. This technique involves every child, holds the group's attention, and ensures that each child must think for his or herself.
- There is frequent oral responding from the group and individuals. This provides extensive practice for each child and gives the teacher immediate feedback on the effectiveness of the instruction.
- Small learning increments are taught in a carefully controlled sequence through interactions between the teacher and the group. Increased student success leads to an increased expectancy of achievement.
- Teacher praises correct responses and avoids negative reinforcement. This specific feedback reinforces and rewards success.
- Every lesson uses all three modes of learning: visual, oral/auditory, and written. Children with different reasons for poor performance can be taught in the same group.

As with any program, there are always negatives or perceived disadvantages. The negatives should always be considered, however. One must closely examine them in order to apply an appropriate weight to each. The final questions or "measuring sticks" should be: Does the program work? Do the kids learn to read? Are the techniques sound and research-driven? Have these positive results been accomplished in an efficient manner? Is quality assurance built into the program? From my experience, below are a few of the commonly mentioned negatives of a D.I. program that sometime deter schools from using this method of

instruction.

- Requires training. This is typically an extra cost that many school systems believe they cannot afford, although the cost of training is minimal.
- Initial monetary costs are high (buying kits, textbooks, presentation materials, and so on.). Any new program has high initial costs; however, once these start-up materials are purchased, the costs for consumables are minimal.
- The myths that exist. According to Adams and Engelmann (1996), some of the myths about Direct Instruction are based on real features of the D.I. scheme, but draw faulty conclusions. These myths exist because of a lack of thorough understanding of the philosophy, features, research, and logic that drives the program. Myths will always exist as long as people seek to avoid the "real" reasons why large numbers of children do not learn to read.
- Does not have "bells and whistles." Many child-centered constructivists believe that unless songs are being played and children are dancing, then real learning must not be taking place. Rarely do they talk about how inefficient and ineffective many of the current "feel good" programs being used in our schools really are. How proud a parent must be when their child comes home singing the alphabet song, but has no clue how to use those letters to make sounds, blends, words, and sentences!

With Direct Instruction, students feel good about themselves because success, applicability, and transference is built into the program. Opportunities for successful experiences are prevalent in the program; students who dread reading, soon boast that reading

has become their favorite subject. Teachers feel good too because they will see positive results in a relatively short period of time. This difference in affect is based on literally hundreds of conversations and interviews with teachers and students who were involved in a Direct Instruction program in some capacity.

## Movement Toward More Effective Instruction

It is important to repeat that there is no one way to totally get the job done when it comes to teaching children how to read. However, I do believe there are good ways to teach and not-so-good ways to learn. There are certain techniques that are effective, some less so, and others that are not. There are some programs that have merit, while there are others that do not. There are both efficient and inefficient methods of introducing concepts and strategies. The sequencing of information can be done logically and according to valid and reliable research, or it can be done in a haphazard fashion because "that's the way it has always been done." Teachers can be consistent in terminology and language, or they can continue to confuse kids with fancy words like uppercase, cursive, schwa, manuscript, and so on. Nonetheless, quality assurance must be increased in our classrooms in order to enhance the likelihood that good, competent, research-driven, time-tested, meaningful, appropriate, and effective reading instruction is taking place.

I have studied and analyzed the components that researchers say contribute to effective instruction and efficient learning. In this paper, I outlined a program, philosophy, method, and technique that I believe contains most of the elements that, when administered properly, will give all students a fighting chance to become readers. It provides the basic foundation

that can be built upon, supplemented, and fortified. It provides a clear blueprint that hopefully will produce predictable outcomes. It provides the quality assurance that most other programs fall short on. It can help the weak teacher to become average; it can help the average teacher to become good; it can help the good teacher to become excellent, and it can help make the excellent teacher, outstanding.

I became familiar with Direct Instruction while serving as a special education teacher in a classroom for the mentally challenged. It was one of the few methods of instruction that we determined worked consistently well with students with disabilities at all levels--elementary, junior high, and high school. It also did not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, age, or disability. It worked with everyone! Direct Instruction was originally designed as a basal program for regular students. However, due to the structured nature of the program, its unique design, and the various other components already described, it seemed to be especially effective with students with disabilities. Subsequently, and for years, Direct Instruction was considered a program for special education students only. This may be a primary reason as to why it took so long to catch on in regular classrooms. The irony is that most of the field-testing and research on D.I. was done with regular students! Fortunately, teachers and administrators today seem to have overcome that fallacy, although not entirely.

It is my belief that we need more Direct Instruction teaching in our schools, especially where critical basic skills must be acquired by students in order to ensure their academic success. Certainly, it is not my contention that this method of instruction be the only one used by teachers. I believe that effective teaching necessitates the utilization of a variety of

research-based teaching strategies. Naturally, attention must be given to the unique needs of the students, their individual learning styles, and the context in which the teacher, student, school, and community find themselves. The notion or accusation that Direct Instruction advocates believe that this approach is the cure-all that ends-all or that it should be the only one used with children is ill-conceived and inaccurate.

## Need for Quality Assurance

Currently, we have very little quality assurance in our schools. Despite the volumes of effective schools research and Edward Deming's Total Quality Management research on validated practices and procedures, which have been proven to significantly influence student learning, we continue to be satisfied with the status quo (Brookover, 1982). Teachers are allowed to teach utilizing a variety of techniques, many of which are not sound, proven, or research driven! Lest we forget, teaching students to read is a very difficult and complex task. Most experienced teachers will admit that it took them several years before they considered themselves competent and confident reading instructors. During the first few years, teachers basically have to teach themselves how to teach reading because most received inadequate training during their teacher preparation program.

There is no real structure, continuity, or consistency of instruction that maximizes quality assurance in our reading classrooms. We assume that our teachers come straight out of college armed with the magical blueprint for successful reading instruction, yet most do not. There is minimal communication and continuity among and between teachers. An over-simplified example of this observation involves examining and recognizing the confusion that a

young student must be experiencing as three teachers in his or her school day refer to "A" as a capital "A," a big "A," and an uppercase "A"! Learning is extremely complex, yet college graduates with very little practical experience or training enter our classrooms only to transmit highly vital skills, concepts, and strategies to students in a haphazard fashion and with minimal understanding of proven research that indicates how and why it should be done.

The blame for ineffective instruction does not lie with the teacher's efforts, but rather resides with his or her training and teacher preparation. The preservice teacher is inundated with theories for two years that are later reproduced in National Teacher exams. The problem is that the teacher's preparation is so watered down and non-specific that it becomes irrelevant to the realities of the classroom. It is analogous to an artist who is briefly trained to use a multitude of paint media and tools and then is thrown into a demanding t-shirt business to perform with an air-brush under time constraints. The requirements of the successful completion of the task are so specific that unless the artist receives extensive instruction on air-brush techniques, the quality of the product will most likely be inferior. The requirements necessary for the successful transference and acquisition of reading concepts and skills are also very specific, and unless teachers are trained specifically for this challenge, their product will, more than likely, also be less than satisfactory.

The dilemma is that universities should expose prospective teachers to a variety of theories and experiences in order to produce well-rounded professionals who can transfer knowledge to a variety of settings. This sounds good in theory, but in reality kids are the ones who suffer. It typically takes teachers many years to develop into proficient, effective, well-

interpret them as traditional, or even logical and common-sensical. Others may only see this discussion as another attempt to do away with whole-language in an effort to return to rote learning. This is not my position. There will never be complete agreement among educators, or the public in general, when it comes to determining the "best" way to teach children to read. Therefore, I have attempted to persuade educators to re-think, to reconsider, to question, to challenge, and most importantly, to raise the consciousness that is needed to promote meaningful reform as it pertains to reading instruction. Continuing to produce illiterate children is the alternative that we must never accept.

## Conclusion

Direct Instruction is one of the most research-driven programs on the market today, and it has proven its effectiveness time and again as proven by educators. The challenge and recommendations put forth by me are based on my extensive career in education as a special education teacher, elementary school principal, high school basketball coach, coordinator of special education, coordinator of at-risk services, and coordinator of curriculum and instruction in the state of Alabama. My motivation for the development of this discussion has been to transfer to the reader a sense of urgency in the quest for effective instructional practices. I have spent the greater portion of my educational career working with teachers and students in some form of remedial effort, and the number of students falling behind has not diminished! Classrooms will always have that cluster of five or six students who "just don't seem to get it," as long as our schools continue to conduct business as usual. A hard, honest look at instructional practices in our classrooms must be taken before meaningful reform can

begin. For every excuse that is given for rising illiteracy levels, there is an existing research study that confirms that there are methods of instruction that do work. We simply need to throw partisanship to the wind, examine and alter the prevailing paradigm that exists, and demonstrate the courage to do what is right for our kids!

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