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Effective Education Squelched

By [Lynne Cheney](#)

After principal Eric Mahmoud introduced a new curriculum at Harvest Preparatory, a Minneapolis elementary school that serves many children from poor families, test scores shot up. Kindergartners, whose reading results had been at about the national average, were now in the 89th percentile.

The new curriculum that proved so effective at Harvest Prep was actually a venerable program with a remarkable record of success. It is called Direct Instruction, and if you haven't heard about it, the reason may be that the nation's education schools don't want you to. In their view, Direct Instruction is pedagogically incorrect. Direct Instruction teachers, operating from detailed scripts, tell kids what they need to know, rather than letting them discover it for themselves, as ed schools advise. Direct Instruction teachers drill students on lessons (a method education professors sneeringly call "drill and kill"). They reward right answers and immediately correct wrong ones, flying in the face of ed-school dogma downplaying the importance of accuracy.

How well Direct Instruction works first became evident in 1977, when the results of Project Follow Through, a huge educational experiment undertaken by the federal government, were made public. Kindergartners through third-graders who were taught by Direct Instruction scored higher in reading and math than children in any other instructional model. The Direct Instruction children not only proved superior at academics, but also scored higher on "affective" measures like self-esteem than did children in most other programs -- several of which were specifically directed toward making children feel good about themselves.

The acolytes of John Dewey and Jean Piaget immediately went on the attack. Spurred on by the Ford Foundation, one group declared in the *Harvard Educational Review* that it simply wasn't fair to judge a program according to how well it taught children to read and calculate. After all, the program might have other goals, such as developing "a repertoire of abilities for building a broad and varied experiential base." An education professor from the University of Illinois weighed in with an essay condemning the Follow Through evaluation as too scientific. "Teachers do not heed the statistical findings of experiments when deciding how best to educate children," he wrote, nor should they be influenced by what "the rationality of science has to say about a given educational approach."

The attacks were effective. Instead of highlighting Direct Instruction's success, the Office of Education

(predecessor of the Department of Education) disseminated data on other models as well, including some that had resulted in students having lower scores than control groups. At the University of Oregon, the only education school willing to give Direct Instruction a home, the developer of the program, Siegfried Engelman, and his colleagues continued to refine their approach and gather evidence of how well it worked. But in 1998, there were only 150 Direct Instruction schools in the U.S.

A major hindrance has been that colleges of education do not teach future teachers and administrators about Direct Instruction; they have learn about it through happenstance. Thaddeus Lott, the principal of Wesley Elementary School in Houston, was searching for a program for the kids at his school, located in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, when he chanced upon a book by Mr. Engelman. Mr. Lott instituted Direct Instruction at Wesley, and for more than two decades his students have been distinguishing themselves, producing test scores that put Wesley in the top ranks. Mr. Mahmoud happened to hear of Mr. Lott's success at Wesley -- to the benefit of hundreds of Minneapolis children.

And still the ed schools continue their not-so-benign neglect. In recently reviewing dozens of textbooks used to teach future teachers, I found exactly one mention of Direct Instruction, a reference a few sentences long that described it as "prescriptive." A teacher at Mr. Lott's school, Brandi Scott, a recent graduate of the University of Houston, told me that her request to practice-teach at Wesley was initially refused by the college of education. Only after her father, a prominent Houston attorney, got involved was a plan worked out that let her do half her practice teaching at the school.

A recent report by the American Institutes for Research offers hope to those who think that ed-school silence on Direct Instruction should end. The report found that Direct Instruction was one of only two educational approaches with strong evidence of positive effect, a conclusion hard to ignore. Equally important, one of the report's sponsors was the National Education Association. If an organization as notoriously intransigent as the NEA can help bring recognition to Direct Instruction, perhaps at long last there is the possibility of persuading ed schools to give it the attention it deserves.

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