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Follow Through: Why Didn't We?

Cathy L. Watkins

What do we do with a teaching technique that works? Surely, educators would welcome such a breakthrough with open arms. Incredibly, they haven't.

Project Follow Through, the largest experiment ever undertaken to find effective methods for teaching disadvantaged children, discovered such a teaching method at a cost of nearly a billion dollars. They call it "Direct Instruction," a highly structured, teacher- led teaching method.

Between 1968 -1976, achievement data from 51 school districts, using nine different teaching approaches (models), ranging from Direct Instruction to Child-Centered and Open Education, were collected from nearly 10,000 children each year until they completed grade three.

Stanford Research Institute collected the data, Abt Associates analyzed it, and three reliable, independent sources verified it.

Students were assessed in three primary categories according to achievement in basic academic skills; general problem solving skills; and the development of self-concept.

Direct Instruction (DI) outperformed both traditionally taught comparison groups and all other tested models. DI outstripped them not only in Basic Skills (word knowledge, spelling, language, and math computation), and in Cognitive-Conceptual Skills (reading comprehension, math concepts and problem solving), but in Self-Concept as well--the category emphasized by the "progressive" teaching models.

Follow Through clearly established "what works" yet the education community ignored it. It contradicted their core ideas about teaching. The approach that teachers are taught to disdain worked well, and the ones they are taught to favor were embarrassing disappointments. When the truth hurt, they buried it.

The journal *Effective School Practices* devoted an entire issue (Volume 15 Number 1, Winter 1995-6) to the Follow Through findings: <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adiep/ft/151toc.htm>. In one of the articles, "Follow Through: Why Didn't We?" by Cathy L. Watkins of California State University-Stanislaus, discusses how the education bureaucracy rejected the model that worked and supported the failed models instead.

She concludes that they focused on their own agenda and the preservation of the status quo instead of results. Change is inconvenient and implementing Direct Instruction would upset the pedagogical apple cart.

For a start, educators would have to renounce their longstanding “student-centered” educational philosophy. Everyone from classroom teachers to professors of education would have to be deprogrammed and retrained, and teacher-training programs would have to be drastically revised.

Not surprisingly, the entire education system fought change. The federal Joint Dissemination Review Panel (JDRP) and the National Diffusion Network had been established to validate and distribute effective education programs. In the case of Follow Through, however, JDRP classified models as effective even though they contributed nothing to student academic achievement. Instead, models were rated as “exemplary and effective” if they had a positive impact on anyone involved—including program staff and non-enrolled students.

Essentially, the Follow Through findings were buried in a sea of disinformation. School districts never found out which models worked, and JDRP defeated the very purpose of its own existence. Their upside-down logic extended even to funding: The worst performing teaching models got the most money on the grounds that they needed the most help! In a war, it would have been called treason.

Watkins concludes that the Follow Through decisions were based on what’s popular with educators, not on what works. “Progressive” educators did not agree with Direct Instruction, so they distorted and suppressed what they found disagreeable. The colleges of education concurred.

Teachers feel comfortable teaching the way they’ve been taught. Most have never heard of Follow Through much less understand Direct Instruction. To the contrary, they have been taught that student-centered teaching methods are the most effective, and that student failure is mostly the product of social, economic, and cultural factors.

School Districts want effective programs but they don’t want disruptive changes. And publishers publish what the education marketplace wants, not what works.

Today, 20 years after the publication of the Follow Through evaluation, academic achievement has not improved noticeably and Direct Instruction remains mostly unknown. Bureaucratic sophistry has turned America’s largest educational experiment into a waste of time and money.

Is there any hope? Yes, some. Some of the “No Excuses” schools have rediscovered Direct Instruction and they are producing remarkably high academic achievement among disadvantaged children. “No Excuses” is proving conclusively that how students are taught can make a profound difference. The education community should heed this lesson and take a fresh look at the Follow Through findings.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com