

ECF Education Briefs

Issues in Public Education: Research and Analysis
from the Education Consumers Foundation

May 2001 • v1n5

Direct Instruction and the Teaching of Early Reading, Wisconsin's Teacher-Led Insurgency

By Mark C. Schug, Sara G. Tarver, and Richard D. Western

Thiensville, WI: Wisconsin Public Research Institute, 2001.

Found online at http://education-consumers.org/research/briefs_0501.htm



Education Consumers Foundation

1655 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 700 • Arlington, VA 22209

www.education-consumers.org

Direct Instruction and the Teaching of Early Reading, Wisconsin's Teacher-Led Insurgency

Mark C. Schug, Sara G. Tarver, and Richard D. Western

Everyone knows reading is the foundation of learning. Students know it. Parents know it. Teachers know it. So why isn't it taught using only the most carefully tested methods?

Direct Instruction (DI) is arguably the most extensively tested method for teaching reading. It is not the only effective method, but it is one that has been shown to work with both advantaged and disadvantaged students alike. Newly trained teachers in Wisconsin (the focus of the featured report) know little about it, however, because it is not taught in most schools of education. DI is not consistent with the pedagogical theories favored by education professors.

Despite clear evidence of DI's effectiveness, some professors claim that it is only for the disadvantaged, others that it is dated and might be damaging, and one group even suggests that DI might induce criminal behaviour. Clearly, such arguments stem from something other than evidence and logic.

Contrary to its depiction by teacher-educators, DI is not only effective, but students enjoy it. They enjoy seeing themselves make progress in decoding skills and comprehension. Competition among classmates thrives, and classroom behavior problems decline as children's efforts focus on learning.

More importantly, reading well early enables students to gain far more from their subsequent schooling.

The Wisconsin Policy Research Institute's Report, *Direct Instruction and the Teaching of Early Reading, Wisconsin's Teacher-Led Insurgency*, examines the spread of DI reading instruction among Wisconsin's teachers and the positive outcomes it has produced. It examines what DI is, why it is an efficient teaching tool, and why it continually encounters obstacles.

DI is a highly structured, systematic teaching method (which is what education professors don't like about it). It is teacher-directed and based on the concept that careful, stepwise instruction minimizes error and accelerates learning. DI is used to teach a variety of academic subjects but it is especially effective with early reading skills.

Experimental studies and field trials conducted over the past 25 years have repeatedly demonstrated DI's superiority. Research concluded in 1999 by the American Institute for Research found that DI and two other approaches were the only ones of 24 school-wide reform models that showed positive effect on student achievement. And the federally funded Project Follow Through, the largest experiment in teaching methods ever undertaken, showed DI to be far superior to eight other approaches for teaching disadvantaged children.

Despite solid evidence of effectiveness, teacher-training programs all but ignore DI. The survey of first year teachers in Wisconsin undertaken by Schug, et al showed that only 12 percent had received training that emphasized DI. New teachers who learned about DI mostly got their knowledge from classroom teachers during student teaching practice.

One reason DI isn't popular with professors may be that it is not easy to learn. Many teachers say DI is "slow, repetitive, and boring;" and, in fact, it is for the novice user. Proficiency requires considerable practice. The good news, however, is that DI leaves children smiling with satisfaction. They see themselves making progress and they experience a feeling of accomplishment--an outcome that ultimately rewards the teacher as well.

DI has other advantages. As the WPRI report observes, costs of remedial instruction have become prohibitive. In Michigan, for instance, over a third of high school graduates have not attained basic literacy and math skills. And nationwide, the cost of remedial instruction is estimated at \$16.6 billion per year. The authors believe better instruction would alleviate both these costs and the necessity of special education for many students who simply have not learned to read.

Remedial reading instruction due to ineffective teaching in the early grades is, by itself, a substantial expense. In Wisconsin alone, a 75 percent reduction in students who are learning disabled because of their poor reading skills would save the state over \$100 million annually.

The WPRI report recommends that the Wisconsin legislature, the Department of Public Instruction, and Wisconsin's parents support the teacher-led efforts to use DI. Also, it urges Wisconsin's colleges of education to concern themselves less with theory and more with teaching teachers proven methods of instruction.

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