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DIRECT INSTRUCTION OF COMPREHENSION: WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN?

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The term "direct instruction" is being applied more and more to the teaching of reading, particularly to the teaching of comprehension. The most dramatic evidence of this is the commitment recently made by the Center for the Study of Reading:

During the next five years, a major task of the Center for the Study of Reading ought to be to devise improved means of instruction based on insights that are emerging from basic research into the nature of reading. The challenge is to develop direct methods for teaching basic reading comprehension skills, basic study skills and basic thinking skills to tens of thousands of children who, in the absence of explicit instruction, are not acquiring these skills today. This is a challenge we accept with enthusiasm (Anderson, p. 6).

Similarly, we find reading researchers suggesting (1) the need to directly "induce" inferencing (Hansen, 1981), (2) the importance of directly teaching comprehension of math word problems (Cohen & Stover, 1982), (3) the need to provide direct instruction for concepts about a topic which is to be read (Pearson, Hansen & Gordon, 1979) and (4) the need to directly instruct the deciphering of an author's organizational plan (Pearson & Camperell, in press). In addition, the desirability of direct and structured instruction in the acquisition of decoding, a concept which had already been accepted in some quarters, has recently been re-affirmed by Calfee and Piontkowski (1981).

Such widespread use of "direct instruction" implies a shared understanding. Presumably, the accepted meaning is the one associated with the results of process-product research in which teacher behaviors correlated with greater achievement gains are characterized as "direct instruction" (Rosenshine, 1976; 1979; 1980; Rosenshine & Stevens, in press). Hence, direct instruction means an academic focus, precise sequencing of content, high pupil engagement, careful teacher monitoring and specific corrective feedback to students.

There is little to debate regarding the validity of findings which suggest that instruction focusing directly on the task of learning to comprehend will result in greater and more consistent achievement than incidental, spontaneous and/or oblique instruction. Within this framework, however, the term "direct

instruction" can mask a multitude of qualitatively divergent classroom styles. To illustrate, we will briefly describe a study in which two second grade teachers, each reflecting the characteristics associated with direct instruction, provided noticeably different kinds of reading and language arts instruction for their students. With this study as a basis, we will then offer some "food for thought" regarding reading the instruction of reading comprehension.

A Study of Two Direct Instruction Teachers

The study encompassed six weeks of daily language arts and reading instruction as conducted consecutively by two teachers in the same second grade classroom in a K-12 American school located in an English-speaking, expatriate community overseas. The first teacher was the established second grade teacher (hereinafter referred to as "the regular teacher"). She was in her seventh year of teaching, had nearly completed a Master's degree and was the designated leader of the three teachers who comprised the second grade team. The second teacher (hereinafter referred to as "the temporary teacher") assumed for four and one-half weeks the total instructional responsibility for reading and language instruction in the same classroom. He is a professor and researcher of reading instruction who had nine years of elementary classroom teaching experience and fifteen years of subsequent university work.

Both teachers worked under the same set of constraints. For instance, both were accountable for the coverage of instructional objectives mandated in the curriculum guide, both had to use specific commercial textbooks in reading, language and spelling, and both had to adhere to the established, school-wide grouping pattern.

The regular teacher, who had been teaching the class since September, was observed on seven consecutive school days in early January as she conducted her reading and language arts program. The temporary teacher then took over the class and maintained full responsibility until mid-February. While they were teaching, both were observed by a veteran participant observer. For the regular teacher, the observer collected 32 hours of field notes, notes from three interviews and 19 entries made in a self-report journal. Data were analyzed using standard procedures recommended for naturalistic data. Details regarding data collection and analysis are available elsewhere (Duffy, Roehler & Reinsmoen).

The results indicated that, at a superficial level, the two teachers were virtually identical in their approach to and their handling of language and reading instruction. Both worked hard, had similar styles of interacting with children, established pleasant but efficient environments, used similar management procedures, were task-oriented and academically-focused, generated high pupil engagement rates, used commercial materials efficiently, monitored pupil efforts carefully, provided direct feedback to children, grouped in standard ways and provided differential instruction to various groups depending upon need. In short, both conducted their work in a professional manner, both created

warm, pupil-centered environments and both embodied the characteristics of direct instruction. In fact, one suspects that if both teachers had been subjects in a process-product study, they would have been judged to have equivalent instructional behavior.

However, the rich information provided by the descriptive data indicate that, despite the apparent similarities in their work, the two teachers were in fact qualitatively different in both what they taught and how they taught it.

Close examination of the data revealed that the temporary teacher was actually teaching different content than the regular teacher, despite the fact that both used the same textbooks and adhered to the same institutional mandates. He added content to that suggested by the textbooks, presented other content in different contexts, introduced reading-language activities that went beyond the boundaries of the commercial textbooks and integrated these in various ways. In short, the regular teacher accepted uncritically the curriculum specified in the textbooks and assumed that it should not be modified; in contrast, the temporary teacher routinely made modifications in what constituted reading and how pupils did or did not reflect the conception in their use of reading.

Similarly, even though both teachers used the required texts as an integral part of instruction, there were substantial differences in how pupils were instructed. The regular teacher viewed instruction as the monitoring of pupils through materials of commercial origin, and providing guidance in response to pupil errors. Her attitude was that pupils will learn to read by virtue of repeated exposure to the activities associated with covering the textbook. Consequently, her instructional efforts focused on the routine procedures necessary for completing the activity, and was, in this sense, activity-focused. The temporary teacher, in contrast, used a variety of materials but, when he did use the commercial materials, he did so only after he had modified the recommended instructional sequence and structure to allow for teacher-led explanations designed to make explicit the cognitive processing he wanted pupils to use successfully when completing the activities prescribed by the textual materials. His instructional efforts emphasized how pupils could consciously regulate their use of language conventions and was, in this sense, metacognitive.

In sum, while the instruction of the two teachers was similar in many ways and undeniably "direct" in the sense that both met the criteria suggested by process-product research, there were substantial qualitative differences both in what they taught and how they taught it. These differences suggest the need for more precise uses of the term "direct instruction."

Food for Thought

The two teachers studied here do not necessarily generalize to all teachers. However, the account does provoke reflection. Just as it is intuitively sensible that "direct" instruction will be more effective than "indirect" instruction in achieving specifiable goals, it is also intuitively sensible that instruc-

tion which is direct can take qualitatively different forms. Reading researchers have done very little thinking about such qualitative aspects of reading instruction generally or of direct instruction of comprehension in particular. Three thoughts stimulated by the study reported here may help initiate such thinking.

First, the fact that the two teachers were similar in so many ways relating to the development of a warm and efficiently managed learning environment suggests that such considerations are crucial foundations for instruction, whatever form it takes. Both teachers invested large quantities of physical, emotional and intellectual effort in establishing and maintaining this foundation, both were consciously aware that their instructional effectiveness depended upon their ability to mold all the complex personalities and components of that second grade into a smoothly functioning unit and both viewed reading instruction within the context of this organizational reality. Understanding the significance and nature of this complex prerequisite to effective instruction may be the first step in considering the qualitative dimensions of direct instruction.

Second, the study dramatized the need to expand our understanding of instruction generally. Should instruction of basic reading be simply a process of repeated exposure to reading materials? The work of the regular teacher, as well as the results of classroom studies of reading practices (Duffy & McIntyre, 1980; Durkin, 1979; Morine-Dershimer, 1979) indicate that this is the way it often is in the reality of the classroom. The work of the temporary teacher, however, illustrates that expanded concepts of instruction are possible; however, much conceptual effort needs to be devoted to explicating such models.

Third, we need to determine whether instructional models which call for substantive instructional decision-making (such as that exemplified by the temporary teacher [or variations]) are reasonable alternatives to the instructional patterns of the regular teacher. The temporary teacher implemented his decision-making model of instruction not only because he possessed rich and refined conceptions of both the nature of reading and the nature of instruction but because he, unlike the regular teacher, was not permanently subjected to the contextual pressures and realities of day-to-day classroom instruction. While it is legitimate to point to the temporary teacher as evidence that alternatives to the repeated exposure model of instruction exist, it is altogether another to argue that the temporary teacher's four and a half week stint constitutes evidence that such a model of instruction can be sustained. In fact, some results from research on teaching suggest that sustaining such a pattern would be difficult, at best (Duffy, Note 3; Note 4). If more substantive instruction than repeated exposure is desired, reading educators must either find effective ways to develop teachers who can implement such models in the face of the complexities of real classrooms or we will have to face the implications of Rosenshine's (Note 5) prediction that it is virtually impossible to create enough master teachers and that, to guarantee uniformly competent instruction, "master developers" must create scripts which teachers can follow explicitly.

Conclusion

While we accept the common sense notion that reading comprehension instruction which is direct will be more effective than instruction which is not, we nevertheless suggest that direct instruction itself embodies considerable qualitative variation. Consequently, we cannot accept the term uncritically. Instead, we must, first, place reading instruction within the context of the day-to-day realities of classroom life and, second, conceptually and empirically develop our understanding of the qualitative dimensions of direct instruction. Anything less than a concentrated attack on these questions will leave us ambivalent about what direct instruction really means and how such instruction can actually be applied to improve classroom comprehension instruction.

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