

# DIRECT INSTRUCTION

## A QUIET REVOLUTION IN MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

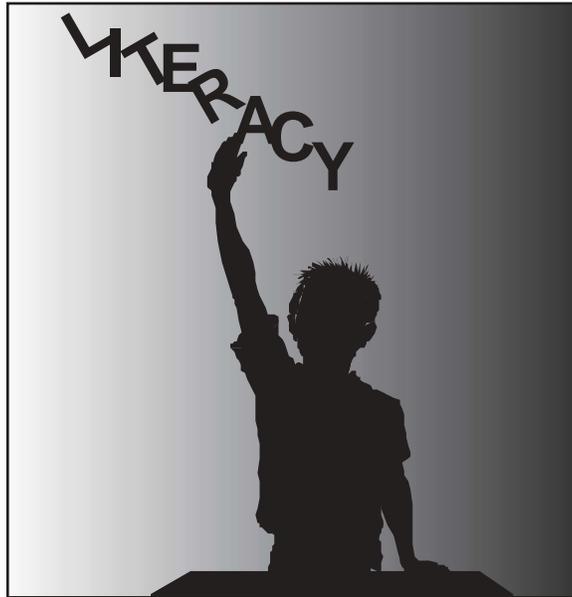
LEAH VUKMIR

Principal Jackie Laber of Dover Street School, a south side Milwaukee Public School, knows what it takes to create successful readers. Since 1997, large numbers of at-risk students enrolled in her school have been making progress not seen in years. Of the 367 students currently enrolled at Dover, 38% are minorities and 79% of all students qualify for the low-income free lunch program.

Unlike many of her colleagues in the education establishment — those who often cite at-risk status as an excuse for student failure — Laber believes that these children can learn to read and she credits Direct Instruction (DI) with their success.

In the last five years, the percent of Dover Street students reading at or above grade level has risen from 45.78% to 61.31%. Only 21.61% of all students were reading above grade level in 1998, compared to 44.34% in June of last year. The school has also seen a 74% reduction in retentions — children being held back — since 1996.

Dover Street School officials also noticed a reduction in the number of students classified as needing reading intervention. All Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) are mandat-



ed to specifically address the needs of children who are reading one year or more below grade level as evidenced by test scores and teacher assessment. In 1997, 131 students (25%) at Dover were classified as needing intervention. Last year, only 52 students (13.5%) were identified as in need of further intervention.<sup>1</sup>

Students at Dover are not only reading better, but they are also behaving better. "DI has a built-in behavior management component. We have seen a major drop in behavior problems school-wide since we started DI," said Karen Lucas, a 31-year MPS teaching veteran and current DI coach at Dover. This was seen firsthand during an observation session of a kindergarten lesson. While the kindergarten teacher was reading with five students, another six students were seated at a round table quietly doing a written assignment that followed from their reading lesson. These five-year-olds were not disruptive despite the fact that they were all within arms reach of each other — often a very tempting position for youngsters to find themselves.

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Despite these successes, Direct Instruction is often regarded with disdain — or worse — by the education elite. Since 1997, Laber and a growing number of Milwaukee Public School educators have quietly used DI to help countless children. What is DI? Why is it unpopular? Can these teachers lead a grassroots movement to reform reading education? What barriers do they face?

### What is DI?

Direct Instruction is a research-based approach to teaching. In this article the term will refer to the teaching of reading, however DI can also be used to teach any subject matter. Zig Englemann, an expert Illinois preschool teacher, developed DI in the early 1960s out of his experience teaching his own twin sons. Englemann created a set of lesson plans from his experience so that he would be able to share his expertise with other teachers.

DI is best characterized by its teacher-directed and skills-oriented approach that uses small-group instruction. Teachers and aides use carefully scripted lessons that explicitly introduce the children to key cognitive skills that have been broken into small units. For example, children are introduced to sounds (phonemic awareness) before they are taught the names of the letters. Students progress from simple mastery of individual sounds to the blending of sounds to make words. As the children become proficient with simple words and sentences they are challenged with increasingly more complex material.

DI expert Professor Sara Tarver, from the Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, summarizes DI in the following way:

Phonemic awareness and phonics generalizations are emphasized in the beginning stages of reading instruction. General strategies for isolating, blending, and identifying phonemes in spoken words are taught before letter-sound correspondences. Gradually, letter-sound correspondences are introduced (in a logical sequence) and integrated with the pho-

mic awareness skills. Letter-sounds are taught in conjunction with blending and sounding-out strategies and high-utility sight words allowing students to read stories before all letter-sound correspondences are mastered.

Automatic decoding is achieved by daily practice of reading words in isolation. Fluency is achieved by repeated readings of decodable passages to specified levels of accuracy and rate. As passage reading becomes fluent, the emphasis shifts from decoding to comprehension instruction. Included among the comprehension strategies taught are: distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant evidence; identifying contradictions; using analogies (comparisons) to communicate relationships; distinguishing between literal and inferential questions; and identifying cause and effect.<sup>2</sup>

The DI model is based on the assumption that the teacher is responsible for what children learn. The teacher imparts the necessary knowledge to all students.

The instruction is programmed; however the emphasis is placed on learning intelligent behavior versus merely rote memorization. Teachers are also responsible for administering frequent tests to monitor individual student progress. This continual assessment process allows the teacher to tailor instruction to best meet the needs of all students.<sup>3</sup> (See Box 1 for an example of a DI Lesson.)

### DI and Its Critics

Many educators malign DI as an "old-fashioned" form of teaching — one that is stifling to students. Images of the one room schoolhouse led by a strict ruler-bearing schoolmarm are often evoked. The Wisconsin State Reading Association, a reading resource for Wisconsin teachers, fosters this image in a slide presentation that can be downloaded for educators working to debunk DI. The following slides are included in the presentation:

[T]he results suggest that we must seriously consider the possibility that heavily academic, teacher-centered programs may hinder children's development of interper-

**BOX 1****DI CLASSROOM**

In a Dover Street School kindergarten classroom, a group of five students were observed during a reading session. With their teacher seated in front of them, the students read aloud in unison the following passage:

*I wish I had sand.  
I wish I had a rake.  
I wish I had a fish.  
I wish I had a lake.*

The teacher and students pointed to each word as it was read. The teacher then signaled the students by tapping her hand on the table or book.

Here is how the above lesson sounded:

*Teacher:* First word. What word? (Tap)

*Students:* I

*Teacher:* Next word. Say the sounds. Get ready.

*Students:* (tap) www (tap) iii (tap) sh

*Teacher:* What word? (tap)

*Students:* wish

*Teacher:* Next word. What word? (tap)

*Students:* I

*Teacher:* Next word. Say the sounds. Get ready.

*Students:* (tap) hhh (tap) aaa (tap) ddd

*Teacher:* What word? (tap)

*Students:* had

*Teacher:* Great. Next word. Say the sounds. Get ready.

*Students:* (tap) sss (tap) aaa (tap) nnn (tap) ddd

*Teacher:* What word? (tap)

*Students:* sand

*Teacher:* Great, now say the whole sentence. (tap)

*Students:* I wish I had sand.

The tapping acts as a signal and is meant to get all students ready to respond. It gives slower students a chance to get ready, and prevents the faster students from blurting out answers before the others have had time to think. This signaling component allows the teacher to observe the progress of all students instead of the select few who are likely to answer first.

And on the lesson goes. The teacher does not single out students who miss a particular word. If a student makes a mistake, the teacher makes the correction and signals the entire group to repeat the missed word.

Notably missing from the students' books were pictures of sand, fish, rakes and lakes. The students were only presented with a text of words. The students sat at the edge of their seats during the entire lesson. Not once did the teacher stop to reprimand a student. So on task were these five year olds, that they were even oblivious to the fact that an observer was in their midst.

sonal understanding and their broader social-cognitive and moral development. (Burns, Hart, Charlesworth & Kirk, 1992)

DI children learned that they had little control over their lives. DI did nothing to dispel the lesson that many children in poverty learn, that they are not in charge of their own lives, others are. DI techniques do not help children develop a sense of control of their lives.<sup>4</sup>

The structured and scripted nature of DI runs contrary to a prevailing view that schools and teachers should facilitate learning by allowing children to actively explore their environments. In this view, teachers should allow students to independently discover important rules of language within a literature-enriched environment. The belief is that learning will be more meaningful if it is child-centered vs. teacher-directed. (See Box 2 for an example of a child-centered approach to reading known as whole language.)

Behavioral psychologist Jean Piaget's theories of child development form the basis of the child-centered view of learning.<sup>5</sup> Schools of education nationwide have embraced his theories and, as a result, child-centered approaches have gained an unprecedented foothold in our schools. A recent survey of first-year Wisconsin teachers reveals that few learned of DI during their teacher training.<sup>6</sup>

#### **But DI Works!**

Attempts to discredit DI are overshadowed by an impressive research base supporting this method of instruction. The most significant piece of research began in 1967 — Project Follow Through (FT) — and became the most expensive educational experiment conducted by the federal government to date. Carried out by the Department of Education (DOE), FT was a part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. The project continued until 1995 and cost about a billion dollars. Its goal was to break the cycle of poverty by finding the most effective ways to educate disadvantaged students and in so doing bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots through the implementation of successful models in our nation's schools.<sup>7</sup>

To that end, individuals and groups were invited to submit methods of learning that they believed would contribute to educational improvements, and hence, deter the effects of poverty. It is interesting to note that all but one of the DOE-approved models used in the study were developed by academics in education. DI was the only exception — the model developed by an individual teacher, Zig Englemann.<sup>8</sup>

FT evaluated more than 70,000 kindergarten through third grade students in 180 schools nationwide in the subjects of math, reading, spelling and language. Students in each model were compared with control groups as well as students from other models. Nine different models were included in the study.

FT measured three types of outcomes: Basic Skills, Cognitive, and Affective. Of the nine models studied, the DI model scored the highest on all three types of measures. National percentile scores for the DI model rose significantly from the 20% percentile levels seen prior to FT. (See Figure 1)

Of particular interest is the result that students in the DI model scored the highest on cognitive outcomes. As mentioned earlier, DI critics claim that the scripted approach is stifling to student creativity and therefore negatively impacts self esteem. This is not borne out by the FT results in which DI students scored higher on cognitive outcomes than students in so-called cognitive models that focused on child self esteem. Indeed, students in these models actually had the *lowest* cognitive scores.<sup>9</sup>

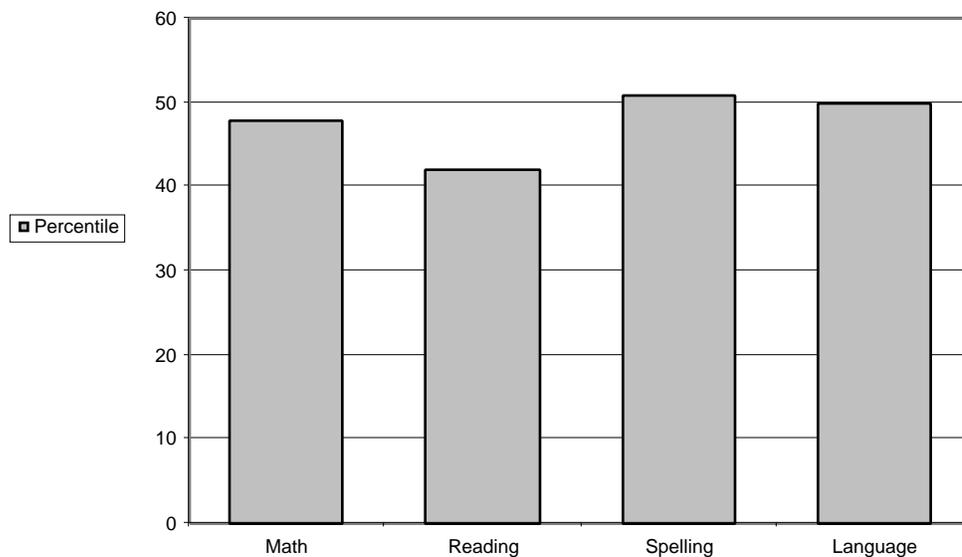
FT findings also showed that DI students performed well in measures of advanced skills, such as reading comprehension and math problem solving. The former finding is particularly important given that DI critics are outspoken in their belief that DI students merely "bark" out words rather than read with understanding.

Research from 1972 to 1996 on DI has yielded similar positive results. In a review of all DI research conducted, 34 well-designed

**BOX 2****WHOLE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

One common method of reading instruction that employs child-centered principles is termed Whole Language (WL). This approach is based on the premise that children should learn to read just as naturally as they learn to speak. Attention to letters and sounds is seen as meaningless. WL students will pick up on the rules of reading through immersion in good literature. Some phonics skills are introduced but this is not done in a systematic and explicit manner. This method is often called "constructivism," which means that children construct meaning on their own from the surrounding environment. A typical WL classroom is described in the following way:

*"Children gather on the floor around the teacher's chair during reading instruction. The teacher introduces a lesson with a "shared" reading; she previews a selection with the youngsters by taking a "picture walk" through the book's illustrations. She introduces new vocabulary meanings needed to understand the story, but there is little reference to word structure. The five to ten new words on the vocabulary list are presented as if they should be recognized on sight, by their appearance and context. Vocabulary words are selected for their meanings, not for their sound-symbol correspondences, so they are not used to reinforce a lesson on sound-symbol decoding. . . . When children take turns reading, they are encouraged to refer to the sense of the text to figure out unknown words. The teacher gives cues such as, "what would make sense there," "look at the pictures," "it rhymes with \_\_\_\_\_" or "look at the beginning sounds," when a child is stuck. . . . This is a constructivist environment: knowledge and truth will be discovered if teachers put children in the lead."<sup>10</sup>*

**FIGURE 1 National Percentile Scores for the Direct Instruction Follow-Through**

studies were identified in which DI was compared to other methods of teaching. Significant gains in achievement were reported for regular and special education students, elementary and secondary students, and in a variety of academic subject areas.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that five leading educational organizations highlighted DI as a uniquely effective educational method. The organizations included the American Association of School Administrators, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, The National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National Education Association. This organizational support was based on work by the American Institute of Research (AIR) — a research group that evaluated 24 school-wide reform models. AIR reported that DI was one of only three programs that presented solid and positive evidence of student achievement.<sup>12</sup>

### **So Why Not DI?**

Nothing baffles DI advocates more than the resistance to this approach that they encounter from their peers. Professor Douglas Carnine of the University of Oregon believes that the so-called education experts have become so enthralled with what he calls "romantic" ideas of learning that they refuse to accept rigorous research that runs counter to their views. "Until education becomes the kind of profession that reveres evidence, we should not be surprised to find its experts dispensing unproven methods, endlessly flitting from one fad to another."<sup>13</sup>

DI has begun to take root in MPS, however the road has been anything but smooth and the infusion slower than its advocates would like given the positive results already compiled. Depending with whom one speaks, the actual number of MPS schools employing DI varies. Anywhere from 8-12 out of 110 MPS elementary schools use DI fully and effectively. Another 30+ schools have some elements of DI incorporated in their curriculum. Seifert and Honey Creek Elementary Schools were the first to introduce DI in 1996. Palmer,

Browning, Clarke Street and Dover Street followed in 1997.

Dover Street's principal, Jackie Laber, a 29-year MPS teaching veteran, investigated DI after hearing about its success from a fellow colleague in Florida. Laber began her teaching career as a kindergarten and first grade teacher so she was acutely aware of the importance of reading instruction and its implications for future student success. She has held the leadership mantle at Dover for the past nine years. So intrigued was Laber by the conversation with her colleague, that she flew to the University of Oregon for a DI Leadership Conference sponsored by the method's guru, Zig Englemann and his protege Dr. Douglas Carnine. Laber also visited Seifert Elementary as well as DI schools in Racine and Verona, Wisconsin. She soon became sold on the program and had to find a way to get it into her school.

Dover Street DI coach Karen Lucas remembers just how hard Laber and the Dover staff fought for DI implementation at their school. Many meetings took place with MPS Central Office staff and with district reading coordinators. "We had to prove that this would turn scores around," said Lucas. This proof was requested despite the fact that abysmal reading scores abounded in MPS with programs already in place.

Not willing to give up the fight, Laber pulled out her one remaining trump card. At the time, Dover Street School was part of a coalition of schools formed by then Superintendent Robert Jasna. The coalition was formed to come up with alternative and innovative ways to increase academic achievement. Laber used her school's membership in the coalition as a way to leverage support for DI. Funds slated for an MPS-approved reading program were instead applied to DI.

### **Milwaukee Partnership Academy: Friend or Foe?**

A general bias against DI is not the only barrier that its proponents encounter.

While teachers at Dover, Clarke and other DI schools quietly go about their work of rais-

ing literacy rates, a coalition of institutions is also addressing the issue of literacy in Milwaukee's schools from a different perspective. Formed in 1999, the Milwaukee Partnership Academy (MPA) is the result of a 27 million-dollar U.S. Department of Education Title II grant. The Academy's initial goal was to "develop a comprehensive teacher education prototype preparing K-12 teachers for high need schools."<sup>14</sup> The grant was awarded to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), Milwaukee Public Schools, Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA), Milwaukee Board of School Directors, and Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC).

The original members have agreed to expand the number of community stakeholders involved. The following have joined the coalition this year:

- Milwaukee's Private Colleges/Universities
- Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce
- Private Industry Council
- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Chief among the newly formed coalition's goals is to address the literacy needs of all children in MPS through a "Balanced Literacy Framework," (BL) defined as:

A comprehensive literacy program that provides balanced skills development within literature-rich activities including reading, writing, listening, speaking, deep thinking and research skills. The framework will provide tools to help teachers further shape their literacy-focused activities with the goal of every one of their students reaching grade level in reading, writing, and mathematics.<sup>15</sup>

To that end, the coalition meets once a week to further its agenda, according to MPS's Jacqueline Patterson, chair of the implementation team. Patterson describes BL as a comprehensive program, not just one approach or style. "We're growing up and moving forward and realizing that a variety of approaches are necessary to meet the needs of all kids," she added.

The approaches or balanced literacy elementary instructional components, as they are termed, include:

- Word/Vocabulary Study
- Reading Aloud/ Oral Reading
- Shared/Collaborative Reading
- Guided Reading
- Independent Reading
- Shared Writing
- Interactive Writing
- Guided Writing and Writing Workshops
- Independent Writing<sup>16</sup>

#### **Criticism of Balanced Literacy and MPA**

Close examination of the Balance Literacy Framework reveals that short shrift is given to the concepts of explicit and systematic phonics

instruction. Phonics is mentioned once in a more detailed explanation of the framework, however the rest of the document reads more like a whole language manual:

Enriches concept and vocabulary development.

Fosters a love and enthusiasm for reading.

Fosters self-confidence as students read familiar and new text.

Strengthens students' thinking skills.

The framework also includes the following passages that reveal the document's child-centered/whole language influence:

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*Close examination of the Balance Literacy Framework reveals that short shrift is given to the concepts of explicit and systematic phonics instruction.*

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Children read on their own or with partners from a wide range of materials. Children select reading materials at their independent reading level. Children develop writing as a natural, chosen activity."<sup>17</sup>

It should also be noted that the balanced literacy elementary instructional components document used by the MPA clearly states that it is adopted from the Ohio State University Literacy Collaborative Framework. Ohio State University is a known leader in the whole language movement and developed a widely used WL reading program called Reading Recovery.<sup>18</sup>

Louisa Moats, project director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Intervention Project in Washington, D.C., describes the notion of balanced literacy as an illusion — one that has been created to disguise the whole language approach to reading:

Although most state education agencies, school districts, and federal agencies claim to embrace "balanced" reading instruction — implying that worthy ideas and practices from both whole language and code-emphasis approaches have been successfully integrated — many who pledge allegiance to balanced reading continue to misunderstand reading development and to deliver poorly conceived, ineffective instruction.<sup>19</sup>

Moats contends that if one truly understands the research one would realize that a union of these two approaches is not possible or even desirable. "It is too easy for practitioners to continue teaching whole language without ever understanding the important research findings about reading or incorporating those findings into their classroom practice."<sup>20</sup>

Future federal funding for reading instruction may make it harder for schools to ignore such research. President Bush's \$900 million "Reading First" program aimed at helping schools improve K-3 reading instruction will require that applicants show that research-based practices will not simply be layered on existing practices that have not worked.<sup>21</sup> Illustrating how strongly he feels about this

initiative, the President's recent visit to Clarke Street School in Milwaukee highlighted the achievements of its students, who have been taught with Direct Instruction since 1997.

Local DI teachers are also critical of the concept of a balanced literacy framework as outlined by the MPA and they are equally skeptical of the MPA's ability to meet its lofty goals. "We know what works in the classroom. We don't need another blue-ribbon commission," stated one teacher under the condition of anonymity.

Their cynicism may be justified. In the fall of 2001, there was a modest opportunity presented to establish a Center for Direct Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The goal of the Center was to provide DI training to MPS teachers. This center was seen as not being congruent with the goals of MPA and was, therefore, politely and firmly rejected.

MPS school board member John Gardner stated that he is usually skeptical of these types of consortia. "Frankly, I haven't seen anything serious about the MPA. It looks like a piece of tomfoolery, but because Superintendent Korte says it is a serious group, I will at least give it a try."<sup>22</sup>

With regard to the reading war debate, Gardner does not believe that whole language pedagogy excludes phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, but rather that professors of education marginalize and minimize the importance of such instruction.

Gardner has visited and seen the successes of many DI schools in MPS. He believes it is his role as a school board member to see where something is working effectively and then work to recreate that same success. "When I go into those schools of success I think, why aren't we doing more of this? It is not rocket science." He added that he is bothered that many teachers of education, principals and administrators know less about this issue than he does.

Gardner describes what he calls a "cultural resistance" to DI in MPS but he does not believe the administration is standing in the

way of the DI schools. He cites the increase from 1-2 schools to the current 30-40 schools as a sign that DI is being allowed to flourish in the district. He credits Superintendent Korte and his "do what works" philosophy for the growth of DI in the district.

Many Wisconsin teachers don't see it quite the same way. In an extensive survey conducted by Dr. Sara Tarver, Dr. Mark Schug and Dr. Richard Western, first-year teachers reported what they described as "active and passive" resistance from district-level staff members. Many reported that their schools were permitted to use DI but they do not receive any support for their efforts.<sup>23</sup>

### The Future of DI in MPS

DI teachers continue to believe in their program because they are seeing positive results every day. They know that much more work must be done in order for those results to spill over into success in all subject areas. Yet, they remain firm in their convictions that DI can help their students. Dover Street Principal Jackie Laber sums up the general feelings of these committed teachers: "We are experiencing a rebirth in MPS led by teachers and principals who are doing DI based on one important fact . . . research." Indeed this epitomizes the "teacher-led insurgency" that Schug, Tarver and Western describe in their survey of new teachers.<sup>24</sup>

It remains to be seen if this grassroots support will triumph over the top-down efforts of the Milwaukee Partnership Academy. While the Academy continues to meet weekly to develop comprehensive plans to spend millions of federal dollars, DI schools in MPS are going about the important task of teaching children to read without the aid of a commission. DI teachers aren't waiting for another set of findings from yet another commission. They believe that another generation of children cannot be lost while deliberations continue over failed teaching practices. MPA, are you listening?

### Notes:

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22. Phone interview with John Gardner. March, 2002.
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