The Benefits of Direct Instruction: Affirmative Action for At-Risk Students

At-risk students often begin school academically behind. But the highly structured setting of the Direct Instruction approach can help these children catch up.

Many children in the United States enter 1st grade far below the norm, and they never catch up. Their failures prevent them from ascending the ladder of academic growth on schedule. A large body of literature suggests that delinquency is highly correlated with school failure, particularly the failure to learn to read (Hodgkinson, 1992). For the school and the community, failure is costly, requiring special programs, welfare, and detention services.

School failure for at-risk students results largely from the fact that all children are expected to learn a specified battery of skills in so many years. This race is unfair for at-risk children because they have further to go in the specified time. They enter 1st grade substantially behind in prereading, language, and number skills. To finish the 1st grade performing on grade level, they would have to learn substantially more than the advantaged child must learn (Hart & Risley, 1995). At-risk children are not well equipped to meet this challenge. They are less familiar with the content and less practiced at learning from adults. They therefore learn more slowly.

Their performance in later grades provides evidence of the problems they encounter within beginning instruction. At-risk students in 4th grade often have not mastered the skills they were scheduled to learn in 1st grade. For example, some of the words that poor readers in 4th grade most frequently confuse are at-the, what-that, when-then, offer, and was-said.

Effective Solutions
A well-designed preschool-kindergarten is an affirmative-action plan that makes the academic race fair. The plan is based on function, not form. We can’t take these children back to age 2 and place them in an environment that exposes them to more sophisticated language and the thousands of hours of literacy-related activities they have missed. However, we can create a school setting that achieves some of the same functions, even though the form is quite different.

We can provide efficient instruction in necessary language, math, and reading skills. Unless at-risk children learn more than their affluent peers learn during the same period, they will remain behind. Therefore, the format must be highly structured and permit teachers to present large amounts of practice in a fraction of the time than would be possible through a more natural setting and incidental interactions.

The ideal goal is to accelerate at-risk children so that they leave kindergarten academically ahead of affluent children—reading and performing in math at around the 2nd grade level. Pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and 1st grade provide the only reasonable window for achieving this acceleration. If we wait until after kindergarten to try accelerating at-risk children, the plan will fail because affluent children know more and are equipped to learn faster. At-risk children who are ahead after kindergarten, however, will tend to remain competitive, even though the competition tends to favor the affluent children, whose homes contribute much more strongly to the verbal skills and information needed in school (Hart & Risley, 1995). The chances of somebody at home being able to help a 5th grader in math are many times greater for an affluent student. Unless the school program compensates for this advantage, at-risk populations will continue to fail.

Focus on Skills
Ideally, the preschool provides an all-day program. Periods involving academic skills are distributed.

Continued on page 79
The Benefits

Continued from page 77

throughout the school day. Initially, the periods are quite short at 10 minutes each, but the length increases until periods are 25 minutes long by the end of kindergarten.

The daily schedule gives children direct, careful instruction in language, reading, and math. The schedule also includes singing, physical activity, and arts and crafts. Part of each school day also has planning and working on self-initiated projects. Older children work on academic content 1 1/2 hours each day.

For this instruction to be effective, all skills are presented in a way that is highly oral so that children become facile at following spoken directions; answering questions; issuing directions; playing a variety of oral games, such as rhyming; and using language as an adjunct to thought and reasoning.

Does It Work?
The main features of this plan have been used in Direct Instruction implementations. Outcomes of Project Follow Through show that children who started Direct Instruction in kindergarten were accelerated about seven months over children who started in 1st grade (Becker & Engelmann, 1978). By 3rd grade, kindergarten-starting children performed around the 50th percentile in language, math, spelling, reading, and science. In comparison, kindergarten-starting children in High/Scope did not perform above the 22nd percentile in any subject (and only at the 11th percentile in math, which is several standard deviations less than the 48th percentile for Direct Instruction students).

A large study of academic preschools for at-risk children in France confirms the benefits of early intervention (Jarousse, Mingat, & Richard, 1992). The children who received the academic preschool exhibited gains in all areas over the comparison children.

Are Academic Preschool Programs Feasible?
Because preschoolers know a lot less than 1st graders, they are harder to teach. The effective preschool teacher must be skilled at motivating children and teaching content to mastery in a way that does not smack of drudgery. Teachers therefore need extensive training, particularly in working with lower performing students. Teachers must learn a large number of organizational practices that facilitate efficiency, such as grouping children homogeneously for instruction and monitoring the children's performance to ensure that all are progressing on schedule.

The training and systems are expensive, but necessary. Without them, successful schools for at-risk children, such as Wesley Elementary in Houston, could not achieve such high levels of performance (Palmaffy, 1998). Well-designed preschool programs represent sincere commitments to provide at-risk children with a headstart that can make an enormous difference in their skill level and self-esteem.

References

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