THE DIRECT INSTRUCTION OF COMPREHENSION

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From the first days of KEEP research-and-development, certain features of the reading program have been central. This core, widely-advocated nationally, has come to be known as direct instruction. While different authors emphasize different features, direct instruction almost always includes: The setting, articulating, and focusing of instructional goals by the teacher; the assessing and monitoring of student progress and activities by the teacher; holding pupils accountable by the teacher; and holding the teacher accountable for providing illustrations and instructions as to how to proceed, and for accommodating these instructional practices to student and contextual variations.1,2,3

Direct instruction can be most sharply contrasted with informal teaching styles, in which the above features are not present, indeed in which the opposite may be advocated. Reading programs can also be differentiated along other dimensions—those which concentrate on teaching the comprehension of text, and those which concentrate on teaching the mechanics of decoding the sound-symbol or "phonics" aspects of text.

While these two dimensions (direct vs. informal; comprehension vs. decoding) are conceptually orthogonal, in practice they are highly correlated. As Resnick4 has observed, the overwhelming majority of reading programs fall into two groups: the direct instruction of decoding, or the informal instruction...
of comprehension. Resnick goes on to characterize this state of affairs as a “correlation of beliefs,” not a logically necessary state of affairs. The issue becomes important when we realize that a mounting body of evidence demonstrates that children learn more in direct instruction than in informal modes. However, because of the correlation of beliefs, an unwarranted assumption has also been growing: that decoding programs are superior to comprehension programs. It may be that direct instruction, when joined to a comprehension focus, would be equal or even superior to a decoding, phonics-based program.

A test of this possibility is provided by the KEEP research and development process. While direct instruction has been a feature of the KEEP program from the very first, the original decoding orientation was unsuccessful and was replaced after some years with a much more successful comprehension orientation. By comparing evaluation data from the decoding-years with those from the comprehension-years, we are able to make clearer inferences as to the real focus of educational efficacy. The subsequent paper by Thomas Klein will present the evaluation data from the two orientations to reading instruction, whereas this paper will describe significant similarities and differences between the two programs.

Direct Instruction: Common features of the decoding and the comprehension reading programs

The general intention toward direct instruction has been present from the outset of KEEP reading instruction. When the orientation changed from phonics to comprehension, direct instruction took a somewhat different form, but retained its basic theoretical features. These will be listed and discussed, and differences between the comprehension and phonics versions noted.

Success orientation. Teachers focus intently on instances where children are successful in performing, rather than on inadequacies. Teachers use exceptionally high rates of praise, as well as other forms of positive interpersonal reinforcement. They are consistent and clear in setting and reinforcing rules. Modeled reinforcement and cues are characteristic. Desists are clear and firm, but punishment is so rare that it cannot be reliably measured. The overall effect is a highly positive atmosphere, extreme teacher warmth, and impressive child industriousness. This has not varied from the phonics to the comprehension program.

Close monitoring of student achievement. Criterion-referenced tests are linked to the objectives specified by the curriculum, and administered frequently. A continuous individual record for each child is maintained, data on the criterion-referenced tests are displayed, fed back to the teacher and by her to the child.

In the phonics-program-years, these tests were administered 10 times yearly, and were referenced predominantly to decoding objectives. In the current comprehension program, the comprehension objectives are tested five times yearly, while the (retained) decoding and sight-vocabulary objectives are tested “continuously,” that is, whenever the child appears to have mastered the objective, as well as systematically tested five times yearly.

Individualized, diagnostic/prescriptive instruction. In both programs, the criterion-referenced tests provided information by which teachers diagnosed learning needs and prescribed teaching goals. Naturally, the diagnoses and prescriptions were primarily in decoding terms earlier, and comprehension terms later. The phonics curriculum was largely based on the Ginn 360 series, with objectives drawn therefrom. The current comprehension curriculum is known as KROS (The Kamehameha Reading Objective System), though the earliest years of comprehension orientation used the Flowing Wells Reading Support System.

A quality-control system for teacher accountability. Both programs specified desirable teacher behavior, and desirable child behavior. Regular observations are made of actual teaching, and these observations are fed back to the teacher in various ways—frequency-count graphs, supervisor’s comments, videotapes, etc. Administrators clearly insist on teachers performing according to the specified criteria. The criteria varied between the phonics and comprehension program, and, over time, have grown more specific. However, each year of the program has had quality-control elements well within the degrees associated with direct instruction.

These four features, then, were common to all years, and allow us to characterize both programs as direct instruction. We now turn to a description of the differences in the orientations, from the phonics—to the comprehension programs. Because the outcome evaluation data to be presented in the next article clearly favor the comprehension program, that description will be more detailed.

The Comprehension versus the Decoding Program

Two changes characterize the current, highly-successful KEEP reading program, as compared to the earlier phonics program. The first is a sharp redress of the balance between the number of objectives and the amount of instructional time spent on comprehension vs. phonics. Now two-thirds of face-to-face instructional time is allocated to comprehension and one third to decoding (divided between sight vocabulary and synthetic phonics). Of all supportive seatwork, about
one-half is on comprehension objectives, one-fourth on synthetic phonics and sight vocabulary, and one-fourth on other language arts. In the phonics years the amount of time spent on comprehension was not zero, but somewhere near the one-fourth or one-third characteristic of Hawaii public schools and those of the midwest. It is important to emphasize that neither the phonics nor the comprehension orientation excluded the other. It has been a question of balance and emphasis.

The second change is toward a systematic small-group organization. In the phonics-orientation either small-group or total-classroom-group organization is possible, since instruction can either be drill-like or individual-tutorial-like. Our earlier program used many varieties of grouping, from whole-class to groups of ten, to occasional smaller groups for certain purposes. With comprehension-orientation, discussion and participation are the appropriate methods, making small-group teacher-led instruction the method of choice. This in turn requires that the children, while not being instructed, manage their own supplementary instructional activities. An insistent and coherent small-group organizational system becomes a logical consequence of the comprehension-orientation. Thus, in the present reading program, direct daily instruction occurs in homogeneous ability groups of 5 to 6 children. These sessions last 15 to 25 minutes. As each group moves in and out of the direct-instruction area, a whole-class rotation occurs, with each child moving to the next area, which has been assigned to him by the teacher. The assignments are written on a week-long, individualized schedule for each child and kept by them in personal folders. Each of the areas, or centers, has a characteristic activity which is supportive of the individualized instructional objectives.

This allows the teacher to devote her time almost entirely to small-group direct instruction. Only occasionally must she monitor the other 20 children, who are busy at their independent “center” work. Of course, this system requires a high level of child responsibility and teacher control—which is gained through specific motivational procedures. The classroom organizational system has been described in detail. It ordinarily includes 10 to 12 centers.

This small-group system has a happy correspondence with the Hawaiian culture. As will be detailed in the article by Cathie Jordan, ethnographic evidence indicates that Hawaiian children are accustomed to learning through working and interacting with adults as part of a group of children.

This point raises one logical difficulty in attributing the higher achievement scores to the comprehension as opposed to phonics orientation. In fact, some of the improvement between programs may be because the direct instruction component of the comprehension program was better direct instruction than during the phonics program. Direct instruction theory calls for contextualizing and individualizing instruction. Insofar as the small-group program does this, this cultural accommodation of the program makes it a better example of direct instruction than the phonics program. Thus we may not have a head-to-head comparison of the twoorientations because direct instruction quality was not, in fact, constant.

Other issues preclude a certain attribution of improvement to specific causes. Unidentified features may have changed. Features still under study may prove to be potent elements of the comprehension program. These studies are underway and, indeed, will be necessary.

Footnotes

8Hao, R. Comparative Data on Reading Programs: KEEP and Kalili Public Schools, Kamehameha Early Education Program Technical Report No. 97; Honolulu: The Kamehameha Schools.
11See Speidel, this issue.

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