

Nomanis Notes

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What is direct instruction?

Kevin Wheldall, Jennifer Stephenson and Mark Carter

Statement of the problem

International studies comparing performance across countries have led to concerns regarding the academic performance of children in our schools, especially of those from less privileged backgrounds. This in turn has led to questioning by some of current child-centred, 'progressive' teaching and instructional practices in Australian schools. Critics have argued that presently-favoured methods of teaching basic skills, such as literacy and numeracy, are not as effective as they should be and that, as a result, school children are not progressing as quickly as they might. Particular concern has been expressed about the academic performance of Indigenous students, especially those from remote communities.

Proposed solution/intervention

Faced with this dilemma, some researchers and policy makers have advocated for more teacher directed forms of instruction variously described as 'explicit instruction', 'direct instruction' and 'Direct Instruction' (capitalised) also known as DI. Explicit instruction and direct instruction may both be viewed as the generic overarching concept with DI as a more specific exemplar. They share a concern with teacher directed, explicit and carefully sequenced instruction with a specific focus on mastery learning. Typically, the instructional procedure follows the pattern of modeling by the teacher, followed by guided practice with informative feedback, and finally by independent practice. This may be summarized as: "I do, we do, you do."

The theoretical rationale

Theoretically, this approach has its origins in the body of research on effective instruction, instructional design, and applied behaviour analysis, carried out largely in the United States, since the 1960s.

Explicit instruction versus Direct Instruction

The terms explicit instruction and direct instruction (lower case) may be used virtually interchangeably but it has become a convention to use the capitalised term

Direct Instruction (or DI) to refer specifically to the suite of commercial programs developed by Engelmann, Becker and their associates in the United States. All of these programs are tightly scripted and prescribed programs of instruction for which all teaching and student materials are supplied. This high level of prescription is not essential and other forms of explicit/direct instruction may be more loosely structured while following similar principles.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

There is a large body of research evidence stretching back over four decades testifying to the efficacy of explicit/direct instruction methods including the specific DI programs. Possibly the largest educational experiment ever conducted, in the 1970s, comparing many different forms of instructional practice, found that the gains made by students undertaking the DI programs designed by Engelmann and colleagues were far greater than for any other program. This has been confirmed by recent meta-analyses. Research has also confirmed the superiority of explicit/direct instruction more generally compared with minimally guided instruction, as currently advocated.

Conclusion

Explicit/direct instruction is recommended.

Key references

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