The Sweet Sound of Reading Success

Research confirms the effectiveness of a teaching technique once condemned as unimaginative.

by Bill Graves, The Oregonian, September 28, 1999

Charles Arthur peers over the top of his bifocals into the faces of six first-graders seated in an arc before him and fixes on one boy's eyes.

"Matthew, look at me," says the 59-year-old teacher. "Say it."
"SSSSSSS," Matthew hisses.
"Stephanie, you do it."
Stephanie gives a long "sssssss."
"That's the girl..... Look at me Vicky. Say nnnnnn."
"Nnnnnnnn," Vicky says.

Arthur moves at a snappy pace in his classroom at Wilkes Elementary School, part of Reynolds School District in Northeast Portland. He asks children to repeat sounds, make words from sounds an trace letters on worksheets with their fingers as they say the letter sounds.

Methodically, painstakingly for 90 minutes, child by child, group by group, Arthur looks into the eyes and studies the lips of each of his 24 first -graders, making sure they all master sounds, the building blocks of words.

Arthur follows the guidelines of a highly structured reading program called Direct Instruction, which many educators have condemned for decades as stifling drill-and-kill teaching that crushes young appetites for learning.

But Arthur has been using the method for the past 20 of his 30 years in the classroom, and year after year he teaches every one of his students to read.

That is no wonder, according to the findings released earlier this year by the American Institutes for Research.

The Results Are In

After an analysis sponsored by the nation's two largest teachers unions and three national administrator groups, researchers concluded that Direct Instruction was one of the three most powerful education program in the nation.

Out of the 24 instructional models studied, only Direction Instruction, Success For All (a program that shares many similarities) and a high school program showed strong effects on student achievement.

Few programs have a stronger track record of success than Direct Instruction, created in the 1960s by Siegfried Enelmann, an education professor at the University of Oregon.

Yet most schools of education, administrators and teachers either shun or are oblivious to the program, Engelmann says. This year about one in five Oregon third-graders and 31 percent of fifth-graders fell short of state reading standards.

"This does not have to happen," Engelmann says. "There should be no reading failures in school."

Direct Instruction, which also offers a science and math program, is used nationwide in 150 schools and several thousand classrooms, many of them serving low-income children.

Teachers use the program's spiral-bound lesson plans, published by Science Research Associates, as they guide students through highly scripted, fast-paced lessons. Children are grouped according to their achievement levels, but they are tested every five to 10 days and regrouped according to their progress.

'Positive Effect'

The American Institutes for Research reviewed 18 studies on Direct Instruction and concluded the program "has a positive effect on student achievement."

What's more, the institute said, students with low IQs progress as rapidly as students with high IQs, and Direct Instruction appeared to improve student behavior, self-esteem and sense of responsibility.

Earlier studies drew the same conclusions, Project Follow Through, a $500 million federal study of 10,000 low-income students conducted from 1968 to 1976, rated Direct Instruction the most effective of nine models studied.

Recent research on reading has shown that some children cannot learn to read without explicit phonics instruction, used heavily in Direct Instruction.

Because of such findings, Oregon educators, like others across the country, are putting more emphasis on phonics and structured teaching, says Joanne Flint, associate state superintendent for instruction.

Textbook companies also are including more phonics and structure in their reading books, say Deborah Simmons, a special education professor at the University of Oregon.

"You will see more reading instruction based on research," she says.