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Reading Mastery Direct Instruction: A Literature Review on Comprehension and Fluency Growth

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***Reading Mastery* Direct Instruction: A Literature Review on Comprehension
and Fluency Growth**

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this literature review was to discover the impact the *Reading Mastery* Direct Instruction curriculum has on student growth in reading comprehension and oral reading fluency for upper-primary students across America. According to the research, growth at this stage would be defined as a simple growth model. “Simple Growth Models actually document change in the scores of individual students as they move from grade to grade” (Hull, 2007). The scores to be evaluated consist of state standardized test scores and oral reading benchmark expectations, the level of expected growth or both. This growth would then be compared to students across America with similar demographics who do not receive *Reading Mastery* Direct Instruction.

As a *Reading Mastery* teacher, my objective for this study was to understand the impact this curriculum is having on at-risk students in reference to their reading comprehension and oral reading fluency. This will allow me to trust that our reading curriculum is helping students make gains that are comparable to their peers in other curricula.

Reading Mastery is a non-traditional teaching style that has received mixed reviews throughout the many years it has been implemented in schools. Despite the research-based data that suggest this is an effective reading program, many educators are skeptical. It is traditionally used for at-risk and special education students to help them to make more gains in reading, understanding, and word decoding than a traditional curriculum would allow. These students are working at an accelerated rate to try to meet their grade-level standardized goals. This review of literature will allow me to determine if the students I teach, who are in an upper-primary grade in a rural school setting, are improving at an adequate rate in terms of reading comprehension and

fluency. In turn, I will be able to compare the rate of improvement with students receiving a different style of reading instruction. Although I am aware there will be causality concerns, if there is an overwhelming trend across all upper-primary grade levels, it may lead to a more in-depth analysis.

Research Question

Do data indicate that student participation in a *Reading Mastery* Direct Instruction curriculum supports adequate growth (based on grade level expectations) in reading comprehension and oral reading fluency for upper-primary Tier 3 students?

Definition of Terms

At-risk: Abbott (2013) stated, “The term at-risk is often used to describe students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school.”

Basal reading: a core reading program used to teach children how to read. The idea for a basal reader is to have one textbook for each grade filled with various texts. According to Morin (2016), a school-age children expert, the program has been specifically designed to teach skills that have been proven to be helpful in learning to read, such as phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, text comprehension (including decoding and word attack skills) and prosody.

Benchmark: Augarde (1993) stated that a benchmark is a standard or point of reference against which things may be compared or assessed.

Direct instruction: According to the National Institute for Direct Instruction (NIFDI; 2015) website, “Direct Instruction is a model for teaching that emphasizes well-developed and carefully planned lessons designed around small learning increments and clearly defined and

prescribed teaching tasks. It is based on the theory that clear instruction eliminating misinterpretations can greatly improve and accelerate learning.”

Five key philosophical principles underlie Direct Instruction:

- All children can be taught.
- All children can improve academically and in terms of self-image.
- All teachers can succeed if provided with adequate training and materials.
- Low performers and disadvantaged learners must be taught at a faster rate than typically occurs if they are to catch up to their higher-performing peers.
- All details of instruction must be controlled to minimize the chance of students’ misinterpreting the information being taught and to maximize the reinforcing effects of instruction.

Mastery: the level of understanding expected to be achieved in the Direct Instruction programs. The goal for mastery is 90% or better (NIFDI, 2015).

Oral reading fluency: the power to read quickly and accurately with expression and prosody (Rasplica & Cummings, 2013).

Placement test: a test to determine a student's level of ability in one or more subjects in order to place the student with others of the same approximate ability (Englemann, 2008).

Primary school: referencing an elementary school setting

- early primary: referring to grades Kindergarten through 3
- upper primary: typically referring to grades 4-6 but in some cases as high as eighth grade

Project-based learning: According to the Buck Institute for Education (n.d.), project-based learning is a dynamic approach to teaching in which students explore real-world problems and challenges. With this type of active and engaged learning, students are inspired to obtain a deeper knowledge of the subjects they are studying. “It is a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an engaging and complex question, problem, or challenge.”

Reading comprehension: “We define reading comprehension as the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (Snow, 2002, p. 11)

Reading Mastery: a Direct Instruction program designed to provide explicit, systematic instruction in English language reading. (NIFDI, 2015)

Response-to-Intervention: According to the Center of Response-to-Intervention (2012), this is a multi-tiered approach to help struggling learners. Students’ progress is closely monitored at each stage of intervention to determine the need for further research-based instruction and/or intervention in general education, in special education, or both.

- Tier 1. All students in Tier 1 receive high-quality, scientifically-based instruction, differentiated to meet their needs, and are screened on a periodic basis to identify struggling learners who need additional support.
- Tier 2. In Tier 2, students not making adequate progress in the core curriculum are provided with increasingly intensive instruction matched to their needs on the basis of levels of performance and rates of progress.

- Tier 3. At this level, students receive individualized, intensive interventions that target the students' skill deficits for the remediation of existing problems and the prevention of more severe problems.

Standardized test: A standardized test is any type of test that “requires all test takers to answer the same questions... in the same way, and is scored in a “standard” or consistent manner, which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students” (Abbott, 2013).

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Throughout Chapter 2, I explore Direct Instruction and some of the elements that may influence its success. Some of the topics I examine involve uncovering what Direct Instruction is and how it compares with non-Direct Instruction curricula, how *Reading Mastery* influences growth in urban, suburban, and rural schools, how *Reading Mastery* works in a Response-to-Intervention setting, the effectiveness of receiving *Reading Mastery* instruction in early primary versus upper primary, and how teachers' perception of Direct Instruction influences the effectiveness of the program.

The Direct Instruction Model vs. Non-Direct Instruction

Direct Instruction (DI) was established by Siegfried Engelmann in the 1960s. Becker and Gersten (2001) discovered “the Direct Instruction Model represents a highly structured approach to early-childhood education with an emphasis on high levels of academic engaged time through small-group instruction in reading, oral language, and arithmetic” (p. 58). This model allows for students to be taught in a small-group setting at their ability level. Students are academically engaged throughout the entire lesson, with an expected 8-10 student responses per minute.

Ryder, Burton and Silberg (2001) reported DI models adhere to 12 principles that guide program implementation:

- (a) voluntary (i.e., operant) behavior is learned;
- (b) learning is dependent on the environment;
- (c) the teacher controls the environment and, thus, controls voluntary behavior;
- (d) intelligent behavior is voluntary and, therefore, is learned and can be taught;
- (e) rate of learning is largely controlled by teaching technology (i.e., system);
- (f) successfully taught students have greater gains than other students in a given period of time;
- (g) thinking processes can first be taught as overt (usually verbal) processes;
- (h) the nature of the skill, not differences in the individual, is the logical determinant of a program's sequence;
- (i) when multiple

interpretations might be learned, it is most efficient that the teacher sequence the skills so that only one interpretation is learned; (j) it cannot be assumed that skills will transfer to related tasks unless the student is taught commonalities in the tasks; (k) quality of the instructional process is controlled by careful, systematic monitoring of student responses and feedback to the student; and (l) failure is a function of the instructional sequence, not the student. Implementing those basic principles at a rapid pace keeps students interested in the learning activity. (p. 180)

These principles were created with the intention of helping every student succeed. This is also the intent of other reading curricula that are not Direct Instruction and are not as structured and systematic. These include basal reading and literature-based reading instruction. Dudley-Marling and Paugh (2004) described some of the principles underlying these approaches:

...the most popular basal programs include anthologies of stories and nonfiction selections, although it is common for the weekly lessons to focus on a single reading. Basal programs also tend to include a steady diet of workbooks and worksheets for students to “practice” skills they have been taught during weekly lessons. Accompanying teacher manuals usually contain an assortment of lesson plans and assessments, sometimes with detailed scripts specifying precisely what teachers should say and when (naturally, teachers differ greatly in how closely they follow these scripts). (p. 79)

Basal reading programs share many similarities with the *Reading Mastery* curriculum. One similarity is that each child has his or her own textbook and the lessons are teacher-directed. Another similarity is that there is a skill-based worksheet provided after the stories are read to determine the students’ level of understanding. They also both provide detailed lesson plans and, for some programs, a script for teachers to follow.

Literature-based instruction differs from the other two reading programs greatly. According to Perles (2016), “Proponents of literature-based instruction usually focus on the importance of using authentic literature, rather than the ‘canned’ variety found in basal textbooks and other programs.” This instructional strategy offers more student choice than the previous

programs by allowing students to pick which novels they would like to study. Perles also mentioned, “Many teachers choose literature-based instruction because they feel that it addresses higher level thinking skills than basal level instruction.” This is a component that is greatly lacking in the *Reading Mastery* program and will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Both of these reading programs are fundamentally different from DI. These programs do not require students to reach mastery before advancing to the next lesson. Traditionally, students accelerate through the program at the same speed, whether they have mastered the content or not. Another major difference is the rigidity of the programs. *Reading Mastery* is the most inflexible of the three curricula discussed. Each lesson is entirely scripted and teachers are not to deviate from the script. There is no input from the teacher whatsoever. The basal reading program is slightly less rigid than *Reading Mastery*. Although it provides detailed lesson plans, assessments, and sometimes even a script, teachers are allowed to morph the lessons and activities to meet the needs of their students as they see necessary. Finally, the least rigid of the programs is literature-based instruction. This instructional style provides the most student choice and allows for a higher level of thinking than others. However, because it is so open-ended, instruction can vary greatly from teacher to teacher.

Many studies have been conducted throughout the years that have compared *Reading Mastery* with these alternative styles of reading instruction. Direct Instruction is traditionally used for at-risk students. Therefore, the studies examined have focused on students who are not performing at grade-level benchmarks.

Akers et al. (2004) conducted a study to examine curricular influences on growth in early reading fluency for students with academic and behavioral risks. Their research investigated

longitudinal growth in fluency over a 3-year period and compared *Reading Mastery* to the *Success for All* curriculum (a multi-component curriculum) and literature-based instruction. Results revealed that students from culturally diverse groups, low-socioeconomic communities, and English language learners had better oral reading outcomes when *Reading Mastery* was used as the curriculum. Students who received *Reading Mastery* instruction made the most amount of growth in oral fluency. *Success for All* produced lower growth than *Reading Mastery*. However, *Success for All* was still more effective than a literature-based reading program. This was determined by looking at the group mean statistics and growth curve parameter statistics. It was hypothesized that the literature-based instruction was least effective for these high-risk students because it provided limited phonics instruction. The study indicated that literature-based instruction would be more appropriate and beneficial for students who have phonetic foundations in place.

Another study conducted by Ashworth (1999) also found Direct Instruction to be more effective than a basal reading program. Overall, *Reading Mastery* was found to produce the best growth in fluency for at-risk students in second grade. The results indicated that students receiving *Reading Mastery* instruction received achievement scores 13% higher on the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills* for vocabulary than students who received reading instruction from a basal text. Although not as impressive, the students receiving *Reading Mastery* also improved 5-8% more in language and comprehension. One reason may be that *Reading Mastery* focuses on students' ability to decode words and gradually exposes new vocabulary incrementally.

The Use of the Direct Instruction Model

Reading Mastery can be taught in any primary school, no matter the demographics. One of the founding principles of DI is that every child can learn. The effectiveness of DI in teaching urban, suburban, and rural students is examined in the following section.

Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools

A longitudinal study conducted by Ryder et al. (2006) focused on *Reading Mastery* in four Milwaukee public schools. Two of the schools were in an urban setting and two were in a suburban setting. Some students from these schools received *Reading Mastery* instruction, and some students received instruction from a Houghton Mifflin basal reading program. One surprising finding was that while students in a suburban setting benefited from receiving DI, students in the urban schools performed higher when receiving Houghton Mifflin instruction.

Ryder et al. (2006) reported on the findings of the Baltimore Curriculum Project, an initiative to bring Title I urban students to grade-level proficiency by the end of second grade. Their findings revealed that although students who received DI demonstrated growth in reading comprehension achievement, their gains were not significantly greater than those found for non-DI students. In addition, teachers in the urban schools expressed concerns about how their students interacted with *Reading Mastery*:

...urban DI teachers expressed particular concern with the content of the DI short stories, noting the lack of content that addressed urban children's lives and the absence of comprehension strategies that engaged students in higher order thinking... In addition, teachers commented that students' success depended on the teacher's ability to explain middle-class cultural norms in a meaningful fashion. (p. 187)

Many low socioeconomic status students in urban schools do not have the background knowledge to be able to relate to the stories in the *Reading Mastery* curriculum. Teachers have to take time away from the curriculum to pre-teach ideas to which the students have not been exposed. On the other hand, students in suburban and rural schools often have the prerequisite skills and, therefore, are able to connect with the text on a personal level. Because teachers do not have to spend time teaching material outside of the curriculum, students can progress through the program more quickly. Therefore, it might be the case that students from a middle-class setting in a suburban or rural school will be more successful in a *Reading Mastery* program than students in an urban setting with a low SES background.

Early-Primary and Upper-Primary

Traditionally, *Reading Mastery* is taught in an early-primary setting to help establish basic phonemic awareness and basic decoding skills. Becker (1977) found that the DI model was effective in improving the achievement of children from low-income homes to national norms by the end of third grade. Although this study did not utilize *Reading Mastery* specifically (rather an early edition of what later became *Reading Mastery*), this curriculum was based on the DI model and has many similarities. This study shows that DI has the ability to improve most achievement measures in early-primary grades so students are meeting national benchmarks by the end of third grade, particularly in decoding skills and vocabulary knowledge.

Stockard and Englemann (2010) produced slightly different results in their study that compared the effectiveness of *Reading Mastery* Direct Instruction with *Open Court* basal curriculum. Both of these curricula are published by McGraw-Hill Education and were implemented with upper-primary students in two different schools in the Pacific Northwest.

Results showed that upper-grade students at the *Reading Mastery* school were less likely than students in the control school to meet or exceed benchmarks. However, significant differences were reported between the groups in reading skills and patterns of growth over time. In both sites those who were exposed to *Reading Mastery* throughout their academic career had significantly greater growth in Nonsense Word Fluency scores on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) test by the middle and end of first grade.

These studies indicate that the use of *Reading Mastery* in the early-primary grades can be beneficial in helping at-risk students make gains on standardized test scores. However, as these students progress through the grades, their growth on these tests plateaus. At a certain point in the upper-primary level, *Reading Mastery* students stop making more growth than their peers with regard to comprehension and ability. These *Reading Mastery* students are more successful in reading nonsense words, meaning they have strong decoding skills, but their comprehension skills are lacking. This leads to them being less likely to meet or exceed grade-level benchmarks.

In a follow-up study to determine if students in upper-primary grades improve throughout the years if they received DI in the early-primary grades, Becker and Gersten (2001) found that in most areas that are evaluated by standardized tests, low-income graduates of a 3-year Direct Instruction Follow-Through program were able to perform better than children in the community who did not attend the program. However, although these children performed better than their peers within the community, they did not perform as well to the national norm after exiting the Follow-Through program. Overall, this study finds that students benefited from receiving Direct Instruction and improved at all grade levels.

The research I reviewed indicates that students in grades K-3 are capable of making impressive improvement with a DI curriculum and reaching the standardized expectations. The evidence implies upper-primary students who receive DI instruction also make gains, although seemingly not as impressive as in early-primary classes. In turn, upper-primary students receiving non-DI instruction broaden the gap between ability level and standardized achievement. If students were to receive DI instruction in conjunction with non-DI programs, it may promote more growth than either program could provide independently.

Teacher Perception of Direct Instruction

The way a teacher feels about DI can influence the effectiveness of the program. In a longitudinal study conducted by Schumitsch and Snider (2006), a survey was sent to 200 teachers in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. The purpose of this survey was to determine if there were any significant differences in teachers' philosophy of education based upon whether they taught a DI or non-DI class. The findings indicated that while conventional teachers became less optimistic about their reading program as they teach it throughout the years, DI teachers became more optimistic about their curriculum throughout the years.

Another interesting finding was that more DI teachers believed that all children can learn and that their curriculum was research-based. They also reported that learning styles were irrelevant, ability grouping is necessary, and that curriculum provides the best learning opportunity through modeling and guided practice. However, conventional teachers overwhelmingly reported the opposite. They believed in learning styles, did not agree with ability grouping, and supported conceptual understanding through facilitation. They believed that curriculum stifles creativity.

One has to wonder if the differences in beliefs are a cause or a result of working at a DI school. Do teachers believe what they do because of the school in which they work, or do they work in a DI school because of their beliefs? Either way, it is safe to say that many teachers have a strong opinion about whether or not DI is a positive resource to use within schools.

Response-to-Intervention

Many schools implement the Response-to-Intervention (RTI) preventative system to implement three levels of intensity/intervention for different learners. Tier 1 is the primary instruction level for students who are capable of performing at grade level. Tier 2 includes evidence-based interventions of moderate intensity for at-risk or low performing students. Tier 3 includes individualized interventions of increased intervention for students who did not respond well to Tier 2 interventions. These students typically—but not always—receive special education services (Center on Response-to-Intervention, 2012). In an RTI school, various data are used to determine students' performance level and they are grouped accordingly.

Reading Mastery works well in an RTI setting because this curriculum groups students according to their ability level. In many cases, *Reading Mastery* has been implemented for the lower two tiers as an evidence-based intervention. Marchand-Martella, Martella, and Ruby (2007) found that *Reading Mastery* was the only program that could be implemented across all three Tiers. The only changes necessary would be the intensity and instructional times.

In study, the *Reading Mastery* program was effective for all students. Students in Tiers 2 and 3 still required more remediation and adaptations than Tier 1 students. However, students across all three tiers showed growth in reading decoding skills when receiving *Reading Mastery*

Direct Instruction. Therefore, if students already have those fluency skills, they should receive a different style of instruction so they can gain proficiency in other skills, such as comprehension.

Conclusion

The current review questions whether receiving *Reading Mastery* instruction can improve reading comprehension and oral reading fluency for Tier 3 students in an upper-primary setting.

I addressed one research question: Does student participation in a *Reading Mastery* Direct Instruction curriculum support adequate growth (based on grade-level expectations) in reading comprehension and oral reading fluency for upper-primary Tier 3 students?

Chapter 3: Conclusions

As research has indicated, *Reading Mastery* is most successful when used as a research-based intervention. It can be effective in promoting student growth across various settings and across all three Tiers of the RTI model. However, the problem arises when it is not used as it is intended (Marchand-Martella et al., 2007). In general, *Reading Mastery* is not intended to be used as a core reading curriculum. It is to be used as a supplemental resource to help students make the gains they need to be successful in their core curriculum. Many times, schools misuse *Reading Mastery* and implement it as a core curriculum. This would likely result in lower performance on standardized tests due to the lack of instruction on required grade-level skills. However, if *Reading Mastery* was utilized in addition to a core reading curriculum, it could potentially help students make gains they would not have been able to make without the support of *Reading Mastery*.

Another consideration is that *Reading Mastery* focuses on vocabulary acquisition and word decoding. It does not emphasize or explicitly teach any of the required state standards. For example, when teaching subjects and predicates, *Reading Mastery* uses the terminology “part that names” and “part that tells more,” rather than the terms students are expected to know on standardized tests (Englemann, 2008, pp. 21-23).

Ability Grouping

Reading Mastery is often utilized in conjunction with ability grouping. Typically, someone within the school looks at a few test scores from previous standardized tests and uses that to place students into classes. New students receive a placement test on their first day of

school that places them in an ability-grouped class. The person placing these students in the classes has often never taught the students and is basing decisions on previous test score data. There is very little regard for speech issues, ELL, or other factors that may have impacted the child's test data. A student could have strong comprehension skills, but because their speech hinders their oral reading rate, they could be placed in a group that is not a good fit for them academically.

Once students are placed within these ability groups, they receive a level of instruction that is at their ability level. For example, a group of sixth-grade students may be performing at a fourth-grade level based on their standardized test scores, so they receive instruction at a fourth-grade level. An individual who does not know these children determine from a test score they are not capable of being successful at the level they should be, and this means they will not even have a chance to try by not being exposed to it.

A problem emerges when it comes times to take those same standardized tests that determined the ability groups. These sixth-grade students who have received instruction at a fourth-grade level all year are now expected to take their standardized test at a sixth-grade level. They were not exposed to any of the required standards because someone thought they were not capable. Yet, they are still expected to perform proficiently at those levels when tested. If not, they are put in another ability-based group the next year, and the cycle perpetuates.

Depth of Knowledge

In general, *Reading Mastery* emphasizes two skills: vocabulary acquisition and word decoding. Data indicate that *Reading Mastery* does a nice job of teaching phonemic awareness to early primary grades (Stockard & Englemann, 2010). As the levels progress, it morphs into

decoding skills which support oral reading fluency. However, as far as comprehension is concerned, *Reading Mastery* does not provide the same success (Becker & Gersten, 2001); part of the reason the purpose of this paper was to focus on upper-primary students. As students start to progress through the levels of *Reading Mastery*, the level of the text becomes more difficult. However, the level of understanding remains low.

Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DoK) chart has been used in many classrooms to determine the level of thinking being performed by students. Webb analyzed standards and how they aligned to standardized assessments (Mississippi State University, 2009). Tasks were grouped by cognition and depth of knowledge in four areas: recall and reproduction, skills and concepts, short-term strategic thinking, and extended thinking. Level 1 includes low-level thinking skills such as recall, identify, and label. Level 2 includes higher-level thinking skills such as predict, summarize, and cause/effect. Level 3 includes more in-depth skills such as hypothesize, critique, differentiate and cite evidence. Finally, Level 4 provides the highest-level thinking skills and includes applying concepts in real life, creating, and proving. Each level builds upon the previous level to build a stronger level of understanding.

One of the problems with *Reading Mastery* is, as the levels of text become more difficult, the DoK does not increase. Students in a fifth-grade *Reading Mastery* curriculum are asked the same type of Level 1 and 2 thinking questions that are asked of first- and second-grade students. The only thing that changes is the level of text in which the answer can be found. This may be a reason why *Reading Mastery* seems to be more effective for students in early-primary grades. As students develop and their level of understanding grows, they should be increasing their level of instruction to meet their needs. *Reading Mastery* does not provide any Level 3 or 4 learning

opportunities for the upper-primary students to utilize those skills they need to use to be successful at grade-level benchmarks.

Conclusion

In general, I believe *Reading Mastery* is a program that has good intentions. When utilized properly as an intervention and not a core curriculum, it has the ability to help early primary students make more gains than a non-DI style instruction. This program can help students in a variety of settings, although it may seem to be slightly more effective in suburban and rural areas than urban settings. Although more successful in the early-primary grades, it can still help students in the upper-primary grades make great gains in vocabulary and decoding skills.

With that being said, *Reading Mastery* is not working in my district. After conducting this research, I can understand why. Our district has fallen into many of the mistakes other (unsuccessful) districts in the study have done. One such mistake is that my district uses ability grouping. If a student is determined to be performing below grade-level expectations (based on their test history), they are put in a reading class that is at their performance level. Not only that, my district uses *Reading Mastery* as the core curriculum for any student who is not performing at grade-level expectation. They are never exposed to the required grade-level material, and they continue to struggle with the standardized tests.

Although these groups are meant to be fluid and flexible, realistically only a few students switch classes per year. We are often told it is “not a good time of the year” or the other teacher “has a tough group” so they are unable to take any more students. This ruins the integrity of the

flexible grouping idea as students are being held back based on circumstances that are beyond their control.

All students should be given the opportunity to learn the information on which they will be tested. They should have the opportunity to learn the state-mandated standards they are required to know. I think it is a great idea to utilize *Reading Mastery* for students who are struggling to reach grade-level expectations. However, this should be in addition to their core reading instruction where they can learn the grade-level skills they are required to know. Using a *Reading Mastery* Direct Instruction curriculum can help struggling students across all demographics make gains in vocabulary and decoding skills, but it was never meant to be the only curriculum in which these students receive instruction.

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