

Early Years of Direct Instruction
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Program Author

In the early 1960's, a part of my job as an Academic Professional at the University of Illinois with the School Science Curriculum Project was to edit and critique the teacher presentation of science materials for kindergarten and grade 1. The authors were chagrined to receive my critique because they believed that children would not have difficulty understanding the teacher. An example of a teacher presentation from the proposed science curriculum: “Boys and girls. Watch teacher. I am putting this small bulb with its roots into the large container of water. Someday soon we'll all be surprised to see what happens.”

Partly for my own edification, I asked permission to watch some preschool kindergarten and grade 1 teaching. I had a degree in education and had taught English, remedial reading and Spanish in middle school, high school and with basic literacy with adults. I visited various pre-school, kindergarten and first grade classes. The result was mixed. Excellent, good or average teachers and advantaged children understood “teacher talk.” It was clear that some combination of imprecise curriculum and less gifted teachers and less advantaged children ended in evidence of fewer children understanding what the teacher talked about. I had made my point.

I was “hungry” to watch good teaching with clear presentation. I had heard about the Bereiter-Engelmann preschool at a low-performing school and went to observe. I went to the loudest classroom and watched Ziggy's teaching and how he corrected and reinforced. I was enthralled. Somehow, I needed to work with this group. When an opening occurred, I was hired and joined the group. I taught the reading program that Zig and I had devised with the special alphabet to our first “DISTAR” tryout groups at the University of Illinois. We taught young children with a variety of abilities. As we taught, we analyzed children's errors and determined whether they were linked to the program or to what Zig called “dysteachia.” This edition was also used in some Head Start and Follow Through programs. Future DISTAR Language 1 was also in tryout.

After our success with local tryout groups, Zig suggested we go to SRA publishers, a division of IBM and present a proposal to publish. As an aside, Zig and I argued frequently. I felt better when I discovered I was not the only author who argued. Back to IBM. At that meeting, Zig and I argued. An IBM executive muttered to his SRA counterpart, "Are they married or what?"

We got a contract signed on Sept.8, 1967, on this tissue paper from a carbon copy (pre-Xerox). We started a several year extensive tryout period before publication of DISTAR Reading in 1969. The first kindergarten tryout teacher had difficulty with our initial format that instructed the teacher what to teach (pre-script). We had no model at that time, so Zig and I created the format which became the model for other Direct Instruction programs: A script indicating what the teacher says in one color type, the preferred student response in another color type, and the corrections in still another color type. It worked.

We had tryouts with teachers from all over the country and our own staff. I visited classrooms, made audio cassette tapes (we had no video). We analyzed the cassettes by listening for teaching problems and children's mistakes and making notes. We subsequently revised and further revised. For the tryouts, we found teachers and students of various abilities. At one parochial school, I was assigned a sister who lacked rapport with children. I asked the sister in charge if we could get rid of her. Her response, "Not until God takes her." Zig's instruction to me, "Teach her." I did, she put down the ruler, and learned.

In 1969, I asked Zig if I could go to Woodstock, the "Love-in." He refused saying we needed to start on the next reading level and there would always be another Woodstock. In Zig's last week of life, I called him and reminisced about some of our time together including that first SRA-IBM meeting. He shouted into the phone, "I should have told those blankety blank executives where to go." I ended the call with tears in my eyes as I said, "You know I've always loved you." His wonderful Zig response, "I've always loved that you always loved me." PAX