

## Reading Mastery as Pedagogy of Erasure

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*Jean Stockard's (2011) article in the Journal of Research in Rural Education, "Increasing Reading Skills in Rural Areas: An Analysis of Three School Districts," offers a productive opportunity to discuss the standardization of language and literacy teaching and learning in rural schools. The purpose of this response is to (re)initiate conversation about the political nature of all teaching and learning and prompt readers to consider how ideology and power shape classroom practices. To this end, Pedagogy of Erasure is a theoretical construct used to challenge the instrumental arguments that support the standardized instruction of basic skills.*

Jean Stockard's (2011) recent article in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, "Increasing Reading Skills in Rural Areas: An Analysis of Three School Districts," offers a productive opportunity to discuss a critical issue in language and literacy education in rural schools. According to the abstract, the intent of Stockard's (2011) study was to identify "ways to help rural schools improve teachers' pedagogical skills" (p. 1). Given that the stated topic of the article was pedagogical development, I expected a study about the professional development of the teachers in a rural school. Instead, I found that the answer to Stockard's question about how to improve rural teachers' pedagogical skills is not professional development for teachers and school leaders, but rather the purchase of a commercially produced "curriculum" called Reading Mastery (Engelmann et al., 2002). I offset the word curriculum to highlight the misuse of the word.

Curriculum is the content to be learned, whereas instruction is how that content should be taught.<sup>1</sup> Scripted products, such as Reading Mastery, frequently confuse this distinction by dictating both content and method. Giroux (1994) notes that curriculum is often seen as an objective text that simply has to be imparted to students. Like any text, however, curriculum is always situated within larger ideologies about how the world works. The ideology of basic skills, for example, is compatible with discourses of standardization where "the histories, experiences, and communities" that shape students' "identities and sense of place are irrelevant to what is taught and how it is taught" (Giroux, 1994, p. 35).

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to C. Freie for pointing out this distinction.

### DISTAR & Reading Mastery

Readers may recall DISTAR from the 1960s. DISTAR is now marketed as Reading Mastery (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) and is part of the Direct Instruction "corpus of curricula" (Stockard, 2011, p. 2). The following is Stockard's description of Direct Instruction (DI):

The approach attempts to control all the major variables that impact student learning through the placement and grouping of students into instructional groups, the rate and type of examples presented by the teacher, the wording that teachers use to teach specific concepts and skills, the frequency and type of review of material introduced, the assessment of students' mastery of material covered, and the responses by teachers to students' attempts to learn the material (2011, p. 3).

The goal of this approach is to increase "reading skills" as defined and measured by another commercial product, the DIBELS system (Stockard, 2011, p. 6). DIBELS, The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, according to The Dynamic Measurement Group (<http://dibels.org/index.html>) is a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. In Stockard's words, "DIBELS measures incorporate assessments of various elements of reading development including children's ability to link sounds and letters" (p. 6). Stockard used only two DIBELS measures: Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) and Oral Reading Fluency. No DIBELS test attempts to measure comprehension. The two DIBELS tests used in this study measure a child's accuracy in decoding nonsense words

words such as *sig*, *rav*, or *ov* in addition to oral reading speed and accuracy. There is existing research that critiques the idea that reading can be meaningfully assessed solely in terms of accuracy and rate (Deeney, 2010; Goodman, 2006; Samuels, 2007; Tierney & Thome, 2006), but DIBELS is reported to be a valid measure of a child's reading speed and skill in decoding nonsense words.

The scope of the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* is stated as (publishing) "original pieces of scholarly research of demonstrable relevance to educational issues within rural settings." Stockard (2011) describes the warrant for her study as "how rural districts in a sparsely populated state can support teachers' pedagogical development and how this support can translate into higher student achievement" (p. 1). She contextualizes her study (and establishes its relevance to rural education) by citing studies that express the challenges faced by rural schools. The solution offered by this study is a commercial product consisting of scripts from which teachers are required to teach. While the studies Stockard cites paint rural schools as places of lack, she does not offer any evidence that rural teachers' pedagogical knowledge, either as a general rule or in the schools in her study, is lacking. By not offering evidence to support her assertion that rural teachers lack pedagogical skills, Stockard positions her opinion as a common sense understanding not requiring defending or explaining. This prepares the reader to accept the solution to the problem, a teaching script. She fails to explain how scripted teaching improves pedagogical knowledge--because it cannot. Instead, pedagogical knowledge such as grouping students for instruction, providing examples, teachers' language use, re-teaching, assessment, and response are "major variables" controlled not by the teacher, but by Direct Instruction (Stockard, 2011, p. 3). Direct Instruction teachers are not to function as transformative intellectuals who educate students to be thoughtful and active citizens (Giroux, 1985), but instead are specialized technicians whose job is to manage and implement curriculum. Giroux (1985) characterizes this as "the proletarianization of teacher work" (p. 376). The argument that direct instruction deskills teachers has been developed to the extent that it need not be repeated here.

In sum, fidelity to Reading Mastery requires teachers to ignore any possible links to their students' lives and stay on script at all times (Shelton, 2010). Direct Instruction is undergirded by what Anne Haas Dyson (2003) coined "the nothing assumption," that teachers should not assume that at-risk children bring any relevant knowledge to the classroom. In Reading Mastery language, going off script by responding to what the children know not only about how language works, but also what they know about themselves and their world, would mean failing to "control all the major variables that impact student learning" (Stockard, 2011, p. 3). How can we understand this directive in the context of a

journal devoted rural educational research? A brief review of the history of Direction Instruction should be our starting point.

### Direct Instruction & Project Follow Through

Project Follow Through, a government-funded education experiment initiated in 1967 by Lyndon Johnson as part of his war on poverty, is the research upon which Direct Instruction is based (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2005). Originally conceived by President Johnson as a program to extend Head Start services into the elementary years, the program was downscaled into a research project to investigate how to more effectively teach low-income Head Start graduates in elementary school (Egbert, 1981). Project Follow Through research has been criticized on the basis of its shaky claims of causation (House, 2001), the lack of follow-up beyond grade three, its narrowly defined indications of success, extreme variability of results (Egbert, 1981) methodological errors, and the low-level literacy skills considered "basic" within the basic skills model it endorses (House, Glass, McLean, & Walker, 1978). In 1978, reporting on a third party review of Project Follow Through research, House et al. observe, "The effectiveness of a teaching approach varies greatly from one school to the next. The peculiarities of individual schools, neighborhoods, and homes influence pupils' achievement far more than whatever is captured by labels such as 'basic skills' or 'affective education'" (p. 130). The Institute for Direct Instruction points to Project Follow Through as evidence of the "superiority" of Direct Instruction (see <http://www.nifdi.org/15/research/73>). The conclusion of Project Follow Through, however flawed, was that *basic skills* models such as Direct Instruction teach *basic skills* as so defined by the Project Follow Through evaluators (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2005). The skill set considered "basic" for at-risk, impoverished primary aged children was inadequate 42 years ago. A child with basic skills is only functionally literate, possessing the minimum skills for economic participation (Barton, 2007, p. 192). For functional literacy to be the goal of reading instruction in rural classrooms today is not only unacceptable, but also evokes a host of questions about the ideologies that undergird this as a goal for our children.

In spite of its baggage, Reading Mastery is one of the "core programs" that qualify for Reading First funds under NCLB. This is curious in light of the U.S. Department of Education's findings about Direct Instruction as reported via the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC):

The WWC reviewed six studies on Direct Instruction. One study met WWC evidence standards with reservations. The remaining studies did not meet WWC evidence screens. Based on the study included in the overall rating of effectiveness, the WWC found no discernible

effects for oral language, print knowledge, cognition, or math (United States Department of Education, 2007).

Still, the program is endorsed and “heavily promoted” by the officials at Reading First (Shelton, 2010, p. 316).

### Something With Nothing

Stockard makes a methodological error in this study that troubles the “works every time” claim made by Direct Instruction advocates. Stockard’s study compares “*something with nothing*” (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2005, p. 163). Comparing something with nothing is comparing students who participated in a “special” intervention with students who did not (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2005). In this study, Stockard compares students who participated for various lengths of time in Reading Mastery, but never describes for readers the instruction received by the non-participating cohorts. Even though readers have no idea what reading instruction looked like in the other classrooms or even if it existed at all, she reports that her analysis “provides an example of how smaller districts in isolated regions of the country can help their students meet universal standards of achievement” (Stockard, 2011, p. 3). It’s unclear both to what universal standards of achievement she refers and in comparison to what instruction Reading Mastery is superior.

### Pedagogy of Erasure

My objection to Stockard’s study as it relates to teaching and learning in rural schools lies at the intersection of disadvantage, place and pedagogy. I capture this in the concept *pedagogy of erasure*. Stockard (2011) cautions that the greatest achievement gains, defined as DIBELS scores, for students occur with the “highest fidelity” to the DI model (p. 15). Though Stockard is clear in her description of what high “fidelity” to this kind of teaching and learning might look like, Shelton (2010) reports on her time spent observing in two third grade “high fidelity” Reading Mastery classrooms:

What the students knew was not taken into consideration in daily lessons. No prior knowledge was activated. No personal knowledge was shared during vocabulary lessons or reading comprehension. Lessons were treated as units that did not connect in any way to the students’ lives, their prior learning, or their future learning and living (p. 331).

This kind of instruction is what I term *pedagogy of erasure*. In 1994, Hicks used the term in art education to describe the unintentional practice of erasing cultural identity through neglect, by not noticing and engaging the cultural presence of the other (p. 154). Here I use the term

with an important distinction about intention. My position is that *Reading Mastery* embodies pedagogy of erasure with intentionality. The intended effect of *Reading Mastery* is the standardization of teaching and learning. In order to erase difference, the standardized literacy instruction is targeted toward the lowest common denominator, defined in this case as decoding speed and accuracy. Everyone in the *Reading Mastery* classrooms gets the same sub-par instruction, but not everyone is unlucky enough to get Direct Instruction. It is instruction designed for the poor and at risk. As such, Stockard’s recommendation is that teachers should intentionally avoid making connections between a child’s life, background knowledge, and interests during the teaching of reading. In fact, the highest DIBELS scores come from classrooms where teachers do not respond to their children as individuals or reflect on their own practice because to do so would be to go off script.

The students and what they know are erased in favor of standardization and quantifiable results. To what end? There is irony in the fact that the answer to the research question about ways to help rural schools improve teachers’ pedagogical skills, posed in a journal devoted to rural educational research, is to standardize and decontextualize the teaching of reading: to *erase* the rural. This is in stark contrast to both empirical (see Avery & Kassam, 2011) and theoretical research published in this journal that explicitly resists the standardization of teaching and learning that threatens to erase rural life. For example, a theoretical piece by David Greenwood (2009) helped me think through the pedagogy of erasure enacted in Reading Mastery. Place consciousness, says Greenwood (2009), helps us, “by providing a reference from which one can identify, and potentially resist, the colonizing practices of schooling” (p. 1). At best, I see the kind of teaching required by Reading Mastery as an example of an “assimilative cultural pattern” that has the potential to over-determine or restrict possibilities for people and places (Greenwood, 2009, p. 1). Scripted programs erase the relevant knowledge the children bring to their classrooms by substituting for it homogenized knowledge sanctioned by a distant authority.

I anticipate that a counter-argument to this critique will take some form of “but it works” and I want to be clear that I do not dispute that Reading Mastery results in increased DIBELS scores of nonsense word decoding accuracy and speed.<sup>2</sup> Clearly lots of practice in decoding nonsense words will lead to success on tests of nonsense word decoding. My argument is not only that our rural children deserve more than instruction in basic skills, but also that what they are learning about the purpose of reading and their futures that far outweigh the importance of increases in reading accuracy and speed.

<sup>2</sup>For longitudinal research on Direct Instruction, see Dudley-Marling, C. & Paugh, P. (2005).

### Fidelity & Obedience

Stockard (2011) emphasizes that maintaining “fidelity” results in higher DIBELS scores. High-fidelity classrooms are marked by obedience to the product’s procedural directions and script. The authors of the script control the teacher; the teacher controls the students. Thus, the product strongly frames the regulative and instructional discourses of the classroom (Bernstein, 2000). The children are trained to receive meaning, not to construct meaning. This is a critical distinction. Rural people are frequently positioned as a deficient *other* (Bell, 2006; Billings, 1999; Donehower, 2007; Frank, 2003) and this kind of instruction is a means to control the *rural* “other.” Language and literacies that would otherwise exist are replaced with the language of domination and obedience (Jordan, Green & Tuyay, 2005). What possibilities are silenced? What thoughts are unthinkable? Learning to read in Reading Mastery classrooms is a ritual that requires metaphorical silence: no thinking, no questioning, no opinions (Jordan, Green & Tuyay, 2005). This training indoctrinates children with the skills and dispositions needed for unskilled labor (Shannon, 2007), rather than preparing them to be engaged citizens of their rural communities, region, nation and world.

The workforce training emphasis of Direct Instruction is rooted in cultural deprivation theory (Ladson-Billings, 1999) on which it is based. The assumption is that because culturally disadvantaged children lack the language and literacies valued in white middle and upper class homes and schools, it is the role of the school to correct this inadequacy with educational interventions. Englemann, the founder of Direct Instruction, describes Direct Instruction for “disadvantaged children” as a means of compensation for the lack of linguistic and cultural competency (Dyson, 2003). Scripted intervention necessarily precludes the kind of teaching whereby students develop literacy skills enabling critical consciousness, as opposed to the “basic skills” of obedience, accuracy and speed. The Reading Mastery skill set, however, is not basic, but inadequate and thereby reinforces the inequity for which the scripted instruction was purported to alleviate in the first place.

I believe that the purpose of education is to prepare students to negotiate with others how they will live their lives as citizens of local, regional, national, and global communities. This position, as well as the decision to implement commercially produced products such as Reading Mastery and DIBELS, is deeply political. Thus, while Stockard may have quantitative data to prove that Reading Mastery “works,” this does not explicate the product from a critical examination of its place within larger ideologies that ultimately may be harmful and perhaps even unethical. Why does Reading Mastery work? How does it

work? What does it mean “to work”? Who gets to decide if it works? More conversation is needed not only about this product, but also about the relationship between pedagogies of erasure, power and the standardization of teaching and learning in rural places. My hope is that this conversation reminds readers of the political nature of all teaching and learning and prompts us to consider how classroom practices are shaped by questions of ideology and power. This imperative is perhaps even more pressing in rural communities facing the challenges and opportunities of globalization. My hope is that this exchange in the *Journal of Research in Rural Education* prompts new discussion about what can be accomplished when curriculum embraces the cultural discourses of our students and invites them to tell us what they know and what else there is to teach and learn- by them and by us (Boldt, Gilman, Kang, Olan, & Olcese, 2011, p. 446).

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