

Critique and Erasure: Responding to Eppley's "Reading Mastery as Pedagogy of Erasure"

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Karen Eppley's commentary (2011) on Dr. Stockard's article, "Increasing Reading Skills in Rural Areas: An Analysis of Three Rural School Districts" (Stockard, 2011), uses selected details as points of departure for a critique of Reading Mastery, a structured reading curriculum used at the elementary level. The arguments and conclusions proffered by Eppley have a critical problem, however. They are not merely unsupported by facts; they generate conclusions that are the opposite of what the facts show. She writes:

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 a 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, it is Stockard's recommendation 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 DIBELS¹ 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 (Eppley, 2011, p. 3).

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¹DIBELS refers to the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, a set of measures that assess early literacy skill acquisition at the K-6 grade levels. See: <http://dibels.uoregon.edu>.

Her conclusion then is that the group in the study with the highest scores received the most "sub-par" instruction. Further, this outcome is achieved by instruction that, she argues, eschews connections between the child's life, background knowledge, and interests.

If this assessment is accurate, it should be a simple matter to achieve great reform (very high scores) with at-risk populations. The formula would be simple. Just enforce the maxim, "Follow the script, follow the script, and follow the script." And the teachers would just blast away, rattling off the words in the script, not attending to any specific student errors (because these would require some form of recognition of non-standardized performance). Teachers wouldn't really care if students were at mastery on what had been taught in earlier lessons because there would be no concern for background knowledge. There would also be no concern for whether the children were responding to the directives teachers presented because these teachers would not consider whether what was being presented interested the children. However, Eppley's judgment is the opposite of what the data shows, which is that the teachers who adhered most closely to Direct Instruction procedures achieved the highest performance outcome.

Further, the data Dr. Stockard reported also show that it takes an average of more than three years for teachers to achieve peak student performance (2011). That seems an excessive amount of time to teach teachers to be rote performers who don't respond to students and don't relate what students are learning to what they know. A more plausible interpretation would be that teachers don't achieve as well initially because they are learning things that result in *better* teaching, which is reflected in improved student performance. Teachers learn to teach more in less time through a number of specific teaching techniques that are not specified in the script. For example, they learn about the effects of pacing the presentation, of repeating parts that generate weak or wrong responses, of interspersing individual turns with group responses, of shaping children's behavior when they do independent work, and other variables. Regardless of Eppley's awareness of the

pedagogic techniques teachers develop in the process of using Reading Mastery, they are important and require several years for most teachers to learn, which is why their students' performance increases from year to year.

Eppley argues that "Pedagogy of Erasure is a theoretical construct used to challenge the instrumental arguments that support standardized instruction of basic skills" (2011, p. 1). *Instrumental arguments* are those that show efficiency of procedures, without considering the value of that end. However, Dr. Stockard's article does not advocate the use of standardized instruction of basic skills. It addresses a far more specific issue--whether experimental children in the study achieved positive results over a comparison group on a measure that is highly correlated with overall reading performance. Therefore, Eppley's interpretation of "standardized instruction" and "basic skills" is invalid on several counts.

First, Eppley's position assumes a redefinition of standardization. She uses standardization to mean a lack of differences or intent to eliminate differences. It's true that if an endeavor is standardized, there are areas that do not permit variation, but standardized practices occur in medicine, engineering, and other areas without resulting in mechanical practices. Furthermore, there is standardization of components, such as standardized measurements. But proper standardization is not an "erasure" of things that shouldn't be erased.

Eppley further assumes that "standardization" means treating all children in the same way. However, the trained Direct Instruction teacher teaches to mastery, and this teaching requires individualizing what is presented to the performance of different students. Certainly, the more homogenous the groups are in reading skills, the less the amount of individualization is required, so it makes sense to group students homogeneously. Children who are able to perform on a task don't have to sit around as the teacher presents corrections to other children who make legions of mistakes.

Eppley also contends that Reading Mastery teaches only "basic skills." She arrives at this conclusion through faulty associations of Reading Mastery with DIBELS and Follow Through. Here's her argument about DIBELS:

"In order to erase difference, the standardized literacy instruction is targeted toward a lowest common denominator, defined in this case as decoding speed and accuracy" (Eppley, 2011, p. 3).

It's true that the principal measure used in the study was DIBELS and that DIBELS measures only speed and accuracy. However, the investigator chose this measure because DIBELS was what the schools used. Because DIBELS was used as an outcome measure, however, does not imply that Reading Mastery teaches only speed and

accuracy. In fact, Reading Mastery has been evaluated to be superior to comparison programs on at least 20 different state assessments, the full range of "standardized" achievement tests (Metropolitan, Stanford, Iowa) and a host of criterion-referenced tests (Engelmann and Carnine, 2011).²

Eppley further develops her basic-skill scenario by noting that the Direct Instruction model in Project Follow Through was classified as a basic-skills model. She then draws elaborate conclusions based, not on facts, but on the words basic skills. "A child with basic skills is only functionally literate, possessing the minimum skills for economic participation....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" (Eppley, 2011, p. 2).

However, the notion that this description applies to Reading Mastery is resoundingly contradicted by fact. True, the Direct Instruction Follow Through model outperformed all other 21 models in basic skills; however, it also outperformed all the other models in cognitive skills and in the affective domain. The Direct Instruction advantage over the other models was actually greater for cognitive skills than it was for basic skills. (Stebbins, St. Pierre, Proper, Anderson, & Cerva, 1977). Eppley's portrait has the designers of the program intentionally designing such an inferior product that a student or teacher would be unlucky to have to use it. I take that personally because I created the programs, and did it only after substantial experience in successfully teaching kids all the subjects.

Readers interested in the over four-decade long background and development of Direct Instruction programs are encouraged to visit www.zigsite.com which contains a wealth of materials related to Direct Instruction, including an early video of at-risk pre-first-grade children working math problems that would stump most 4th graders. The teacher in that video is the senior author of all Direct Instruction programs, including Reading Mastery. All of these programs embody the same passionate concern with accelerating the performance of children that this video suggests.

The success and effectiveness of Reading Mastery is further indicated by its popularity. The book *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons* (Engelmann, 1986), a condensed version of Reading Mastery, has over 530 five-star reviews on www.amazon.com. This suggests there is no apparent "pedagogy of erasure" for parents. This level of endorsement, coupled with a robust body of empirical evidence (Engelmann & Carnine, 2011) strongly documents that the program works. Finally, if Eppley's claim is true that "pedagogy of erasure" is a "theoretical construct," the discussions that occurred in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in*

²See especially "Appendix A: Studies Based on Unique Assertions of Theory of Instruction" (Engelmann & Carnine, 2011).

Wonderland at the tea party must have been replete with theoretical constructs. Consider the following when the Mad Hatter tells Alice:

“I dare say you never even spoke to Time!”

“Perhaps not,” Alice cautiously replied: “but I know I have to beat time when I learn music.”

“Ah! That accounts for it,” said the Hatter. He won't stand beating” (1869, p. 101).

The more general notion of a theoretical construct is something that derives from a theory and postulates an unobserved property, in so doing, resolving previously unexplained phenomena. But Eppley's account does not identify any unexplained phenomena, because there are none. All are quite explicable.

Eppley's pedagogy of erasure is designed to “challenge the instrumental arguments that support the standardized instruction of basic skills” (Eppley, 2011, p. 1). However, no such arguments were provided. So she argues against the shadow figures that she creates through what is probably best described as institutionalized solipsism. She wants to believe that Direct Instruction teachers are inferior, without a shred of data, and she wants to believe that the teachers do not treat individual children as individuals, regardless of what the data show. She—not anyone involved with Direct Instruction—created functional literacy as a goal for Direct Instruction, then speculated about the ideologies that undergird this creation (just like the Mad Hatter personifying time). Eppley uses the same sort of techniques that the Mad Hatter used—reifying things through stipulation (stating that Direct Instruction teaches only basic skills because somebody classified it as a basic-skill approach) then using words and remote associations to construct new relationships that are at least first cousins to the Hatter's notion that time does not allow beatings. Ultimately this, too, is erasure.

References

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