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Explicit Reading Instruction:
Important Features and Findings

McGraw Hill Education

The purpose of this paper is to describe the tenets of explicit instruction, an important instructional approach to ensure the success of students who struggle in reading in grades 3-8. An overview of the topic is provided along with a discussion of current reading statistics; best practices in reading; what explicit instruction is and what it is not; lesson planning, delivery, and assessment; the stages of learning; and the research supporting the use of explicit instruction.

Overview

"At no other time in our history has the ability to read been so important to *all* members of society" (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Carnine, 2011, p. 50). In fact, learning to read is the most important skill our students can learn in school, serving as the very foundation of all other academic subjects. According to Hulme and Snowling (2011),

> Teaching children to read accurately, fluently, and with adequate comprehension is one of the main goals of early education. Reading is critical because a great deal of formal education depends upon being able to read with understanding (p. 139).

Think of all the times we read during the day. We may have read the newspaper in the morning, read typed text at the bottom of a television screen later in the afternoon, followed a recipe to make dinner, read a quick e-mail or text from a friend, studied from a textbook for a high school quiz, or enjoyed a novel before bed. "Reading is one of the fundamental skills for the 21st century" (Lenski, Wham, Johns, & Caskey, 2007, p. 1).

The evidence on why reading should be a key instructional focal point in our schools is indeed striking. Students who read at high levels are more likely to stay in school, graduate from high school, access college or technical schools, and be gainfully employed. (See Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011; Hempenstall, 2004; and Lyon, 2001 for important statistics.) Unfortunately, many of our students are not on a positive trajectory to achieve these milestones. Colleges must now offer remedial reading classes for an alarmingly high percentage of students (Snow & Moje, 2010). Consider that as many as 90 percent of students with learning disabilities in our elementary and secondary schools have problems in reading (Bender, 2008). Additionally, high percentages of our nation's students struggle with reading grade-level and more advanced text, placing them at a disadvantage in math and science and decreasing their ability to compete for more technologically-oriented jobs (Kamil et al., 2008).

The prognosis is especially dire for students in poverty. The lowest performers in reading are students from families who are the lowest wage earners (Carnine, Silbert, Kame'enui, & Tarver, 2010). If these students are not able to acquire critical reading skills, they will be unlikely to achieve their full potential in education and in earning power. Thus, these individuals may be relegated to a life of poverty, as will future familial generations. When students have fewer and fewer options in life, they often become juvenile offenders. Interestingly, Vacca (2008) went so far as to say that crime could be prevented if schools taught these individuals how to read. Therefore, we should put the highest priority on best practices in reading instruction, particularly for the most vulnerable students, including those who are at risk for school failure or who receive special education services.

Interestingly, Snow and Moje (2010) described the widespread and misguided assumption that we should finish reading instruction by the end of third grade. They used the term "inoculation fallacy" to illustrate the notion that an early vaccination of reading instruction, especially in grades K–3, does not protect permanently against reading failure. We must continue to provide reading instruction beyond third grade.

How do our students perform in reading?

The 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress findings in reading were recently released for students in grades 4 and 8 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). This assessment focuses on reading for understanding and includes literary and informational text with an emphasis on vocabulary knowledge. Students were required to locate and recall information, integrate and interpret what they had read, and critique and evaluate what they had read. Three achievement levels are noted on the assessment: basic (denotes "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade"), proficient ("represents solid academic performance" with "demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter"), and advanced ("superior per-formance") (NCES, 2011, p. 6). (Note: The term "below basic" is not defined in the report but would be considered less than "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade.") The National Center for Education Statistics (2011) reported the following findings for fourth graders:

- The average reading score was unchanged from 2009.

- Among students who scored below the 25th percentile, 74 percent were eligible for free/reduced price school lunch.

- Among students who scored above the 75th percentile, 71 percent were white, while 7 percent , 11 percent , and 8 percent were black, Hispanic, and Asian, respectively.

- Only 34 percent of students scored at or above the proficient level with 67 percent scoring at or above the basic level. Thus, 33 percent scored below the basic level.

- Students who reported reading for fun almost every day scored higher than those who did not read as frequently; those who scored the lowest in reading reported never or hardly ever reading.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2011) reported the following findings for eighth graders:

- The average reading score was higher than in 2009.

- Among students who scored below the 25th percentile, 67 percent were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch.

- Among students who scored above the 75th percentile, 72 percent were white, 6 percent black, 11 percent Hispanic, and 8 percent Asian.

- Only 34 percent of students scored at or above the proficient level, with 76 percent scoring at or above the basic level. Thus, 24 percent scored below the basic level.

- Students who reported frequent class discussions about something the whole class had read scored higher than those who reported doing so less frequently.

These data speak to the importance of effective and efficient reading instruction beyond grade 3. They also should help educators pinpoint specific deficit areas to strengthen for students. Based on the NCES (2011) findings, it appears students need focused instruction in reading literary and informational text. Further, these students need increased opportunities to examine text with a critical eye, to discuss text within a whole-class setting, and to learn important foundational reading skills so they may locate and recall important information, integrate and interpret findings from what they read, and critique and evaluate text, viewing it from various perspectives. Students also need to read more—simply reading more text is associated with better reading performance.

What are best practices in reading instruction?

The congressionally-mandated National Reading Panel Report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000) changed the direction of reading instruction in our schools in grades K–3. Now a focus is placed on the five elements of reading, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2006). Comprehensive core reading programs provided in general education classrooms typically include these important elements.

Further, Biancarosa and Snow (2006) noted the importance of adolescent literacy instruction in their *Reading Next* document for students in grades 4–12. This document was followed by a practice brief by Boardman et al. (2008) describing the five elements of reading for struggling adolescent readers, including word study, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation.

Comprehensive core reading programs provide a foundation for the response to intervention (RTI) model. In RTI, an emphasis is placed on scientifically-based instruction and programs in general education to ensure all students receive best practices in reading. The goal is to prevent reading difficulties from occurring in the first place. RTI was developed in part to avoid the negative aspects of the wait-to-fail model of special education; given this model, schools are now providing comprehensive core (Tier 1), strategic intervention (Tier 2), and intensive intervention (Tier 3) instruction and programs to better meet the needs of all students. Students can be qualified much earlier based on their failure to respond to empirically supported interventions delivered with integrity in our schools (Marchand-Martella, Ruby, & Martella, 2007). Progress monitoring and benchmark assessments are key aspects of an RTI framework. If students are failing in this model, they are assumed to have legitimate disabilities and are not considered "curriculum casualties." Interventions are targeted to address deficits in the five elements of reading for grades K–3 and 4–12.

No matter what grade level, whether the student is in grades K–3 or 4–12, an instructional term appears repeatedly when it comes to how reading instruction should be provided. This term is *explicit*. Explicit instruction will be described in detail in the sections that follow.

What is explicit instruction?

Teachers have a profound impact on how much their students learn. "Although it seems simplistic and obvious, teachers of reading 'teach'; that is, students do not become independent learners through maturation" (Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009, p. 126). Students do not learn simply by the passage of time—they must receive instruction. Teaching requires carefully planned teacher and student interactions. Students qualify for reading remediation because they are academically behind their peers. Their learning must be accelerated in order for them to catch up, so teachers must do more in less time. The most effective and efficient way of shortening the learning time for these students is through the direct and explicit teaching of skills. Consider the following:

> As educators, we all have the same goal: to help our students make the maximum possible academic gains in a positive, respectful environment that promotes their success and nurtures their desire to learn. One of the greatest tools available to us in this pursuit is explicit instruction—instruction that is systematic, direct, engaging, and success oriented . . . explicit instruction is helpful not only when discovery is impossible, but when discovery may be inaccurate, inadequate, incomplete, or inefficient (Archer & Hughes, 2011, p. vii).

Therefore, in explicit instruction, teachers become fully responsible for student learning but gradually relinquish this responsibility to students as they become successful (Marchand-Martella & Martella, 2009). Teachers program for student success and are intentional with their instruction rather than leaving students to discover what to do on their own. Thus, instruction "moves from teacher modeling, through guided practice using prompts and cues, to independent and fluent performance by the learner" (Rosenshine, 1986, p. 69).

Definition

Explicit, or direct, instruction is "a systematic method of teaching with emphasis on proceeding in small steps, checking for student understanding, and achieving active and successful participation by all students" (Rosenshine, 1987, p. 34). Systematic instruction is a key aspect of explicit instruction. It refers to a plan or logical sequence of teaching used to decrease student confusion and errors. For example, teaching letter sounds in a specified and logical order (e.g., separating the teaching of *b* and *d* and focusing on high-utility sounds such as *a* and *s* among those taught first) is a hallmark of effective phonics instruction. When a curricular program includes a detailed scope and sequence showing a logical order of skills, systematic instruction is evident. That is, prerequisite skills are taught in a step-wise fashion before more complex skills and strategies are taught. For example, reciprocal teaching involves teaching skills in prediction, summarization, question generation, and clarification. Each of these important component skills could be taught separately and then integrated into a larger reciprocal teaching strategy for maximum benefit (Marchand-Martella & Martella, 2010). This approach would ensure that those students who need help the most could be active participants in the learning process.

Explicit or direct instruction can also be referred to as "demonstration-prompt-practice" (Stevens & Rosenshine, 1981), "antecedent prompt and test" (Martella, Nelson, Marchand-Martella, & O'Reilly, 2012), or "I do, we do, you do" (Archer & Hughes, 2011). In this type of instruction, students are shown how to perform a task before being expected to do it on their own.

Lesson Planning, Lesson Delivery, and Lesson Assessment

Explicit instruction involves classroom experiences that move students from little to no knowledge to mastery where students perform skills and strategies at high levels (Martella et al., 2012; Rosenshine, 2008). Explicit instruction involves careful lesson planning, intentional lesson delivery, and aligned lesson assessment. Hunter (1982) and Rosenshine and Stevens (1986) described the critical features of explicit instruction more than thirty years ago. These critical features are shown in Figure 1 and include the following:

- **Lesson Planning** (learning objectives and prerequisite skills)

- **Lesson Delivery** (opening, model, guided practice, independent practice, and closing)

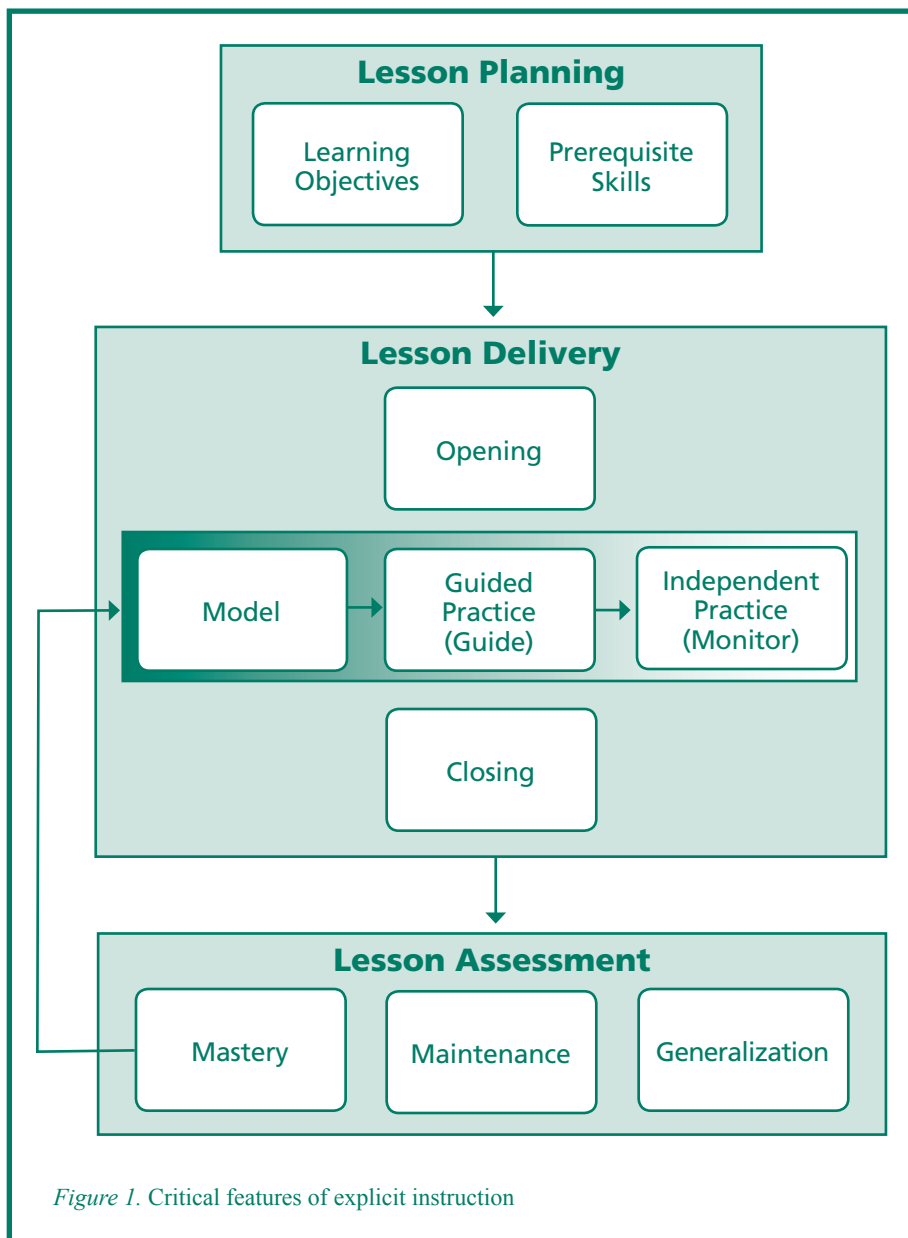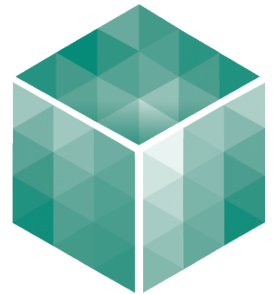- **Lesson Assessment** (mastery, maintenance, and generalization)

Figure 1. Critical features of explicit instruction

Explicit instruction affects student achievement in a positive manner (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Hall, 2002; Carnine et al., 2010; Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2009) and is considered "helpful to all students learning new skills and content, and is absolutely essential for struggling or disadvantaged learners" (Archer & Hughes, 2011, p. 17). Lesson planning, lesson delivery, and lesson assessment are described below.

Lesson planning. Two essential aspects of lesson planning are learning objectives and prerequisite skills.

Learning objectives. Explicit instruction begins with the end in mind; that is, we must know where we want our students to end up *before* we begin instruction. We ask ourselves, "What do we ultimately want our students to do, and what is the most effective and efficient way of getting them there?" Determining what we ultimately want our students to do should be clearly linked to standards. Current best practices in instruction align what we expect our students to learn with the Common Core State Standards (see *www.corestandards.org* for more details).

> The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The Standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 1).

Focused reading standards include those for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Reading standards are grouped based on their relevancy to literature, informational text, and foundational skills. Standards are developed for students in each of grades K–5 and 6–12.

Aligning our instruction with the Common Core State Standards helps us pinpoint the "big ideas" of instruction. Big ideas are the most important skills we expect our students to learn. They are those skills that carry the most instructional horsepower—students can use these important skills in a myriad of ways. For example, determining the main idea is an important informational text big idea found in the Standards. Students are often asked to pinpoint the "gist" of a sample of text, whether a student is reading one paragraph, several paragraphs, or an entire chapter. Deriving a main idea appears on classroom, school, district, state, and national assessments as well. These skills may serve too as the foundation for more complex strategies such as SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review).

Once we have targeted the big ideas that align to the Common Core State Standards, we can plan units (larger chunks of learning) and lessons (activities we hope to accomplish in an instructional session). These units and lessons form the basis of a detailed scope and sequence. A scope and sequence is a roadmap for learning, showing all the skills and strategies we expect our students to learn over time. It determines the order of when skills are taught; it shows the overlap of some skills with others; it ensures prerequisite skills (see below) are mastered before they are folded into other skills or strategies. A scope and sequence contains a horizontal and a vertical progression. A horizontal progression shows the development of a single skill from initial instruction to student mastery and beyond across lessons. A vertical progression shows the skills that appear in a single lesson.

Explicit instructional programs are built on the foundation of careful content analysis; skills are pieced together to ensure a step-wise progression to expected outcomes or objectives. Through this careful content analysis, we ensure that the most important skills are taught. Sequencing guidelines are followed to ensure maximum student performance (Carnine et al., 2010). These guidelines include (a) teaching preskills before a skill is presented, (b) presenting examples before introducing exceptions of a skill, (c) teaching high-

utility skills before low-utility ones, (d) teaching easy skills before more difficult ones, and (e) separating the teaching of similar skills to avoid confusion.

    Prerequisite skills. Explicit instruction promotes errorless learning to the maximum extent possible; that is, students are more likely to respond correctly than to make errors. Rather than putting students in situations where they may not know how to perform a task, we ask ourselves, "Do our students have the required background knowledge or skills needed to learn this new information?" If they do not have the necessary background to begin instruction, we cannot present new material in an effective and efficient manner. We must attend to the details of instruction because they do make a difference in how the students learn the information.

    Think about the skill of blending sounds together to form a word. If students do not know the individual sounds that comprise the word, they probably will not be able to blend the sounds effectively. They will make needless errors. Errors get in the way of efficient learning. They cloud students' responding. When confronted with the same task in the future, students will likely second-guess themselves as they perform the task. If students make errors, we would not know if they need more instruction with blending or if they require more practice on the individual sounds. We want to control instruction to the extent that we can rule out other explanations; that is, if a student is having difficulty with blending, it is not because he or she has not learned the sounds. He or she may need more repetitions in blending or may need to be taught a strategy to identify what blending is and what it isn't (e.g., "Watch. I can sound this word out without stopping between the sounds like this" or "This is what I hear you saying. m…a…n. But this is what I want to hear. mmmaaannn. Now you try it without stopping between the sounds").

    In explicit instruction, a careful analysis of all skills that will be taught is conducted to ensure students have the prerequisites or entry-level skills needed to learn the new material in the targeted lesson. We do not ask students, "Do you understand this?", because it is not a direct test of whether or not the prerequisite skills are solidified. Instead, explicit instruction includes carefully placed instructional questions or practice opportunities where students can demonstrate their knowledge. Coyne et al. (2011) refer to this instructional feature as primed background knowledge. This type of prerequisite check allows teachers to verify the important background knowledge needed to ensure success in the upcoming lesson. For example, if we ask students to describe important details about characters and setting, they first must know what major and minor characters are and what a setting is. Explicit instruction would include focused questions on these important prerequisites. Again, we would not ask students, "Do you understand what characters are?", but we might ask, "What is the most important person in a story called?" or "What is a setting?"

    Prerequisite checks may review material covered in previous lessons, review homework completed the night before, check on the prerequisite skills needed for the upcoming lesson, and/or reteach, if necessary (Hofmeister & Lubke, 1990; Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2009). When we review or reteach information, we pinpoint the areas that produced difficulty. Students may have had difficulty on their homework, not responded in unison during teacher questioning, or asked questions showing they were not firm on the skills. The best approach is to use firming—have students say it like they know it. Firming involves repeating the task by showing students how to perform the skill and then requiring them to repeat what was done. If students are firm on the prerequisite skills of the lesson, they will be more successful in learning the new information to be presented during lesson delivery.

Lesson delivery. When we deliver explicit lessons, five aspects must be included. These aspects are opening, model, guided practice, independent practice, and closing.

Opening. Before initial instruction begins, we should provide a clear lesson opener. This lesson opener should motivate students to attend to the lesson. It includes three parts. First, we should gain students' attention to motivate them to learn the skill. Gaining attention can be accomplished through interesting video or film clips, focused discussion about the topic (e.g., "Let's talk about what we know about the Depression"), simple directives to alert students to the task (e.g., "Turn to page 19 in your interactive reader, and we'll read aloud the story about Helen Keller"), or mini-activities that provide a basis for initial instruction (e.g., "Read the poem to yourself, and then we'll discuss it"). The key is to gain students' attention for what they are about to learn. Second, we should communicate the goal of the lesson. The goal of the lesson is what students will learn after participating in the lesson activity. Wording may be as specific as "The goal of today's lesson is to learn how to summarize" or "Today, you're going to learn how to summarize." These statements help students focus on the content of the lesson. They know what they will be learning. Sometimes, past learning is connected to the goal. For example, "You've learned how to generate literal questions. Today, you're going to learn how to generate inferential questions." Third, we should ensure students know the relevance of the lesson. This relevance may be pointed out specifically for students (e.g., "Knowing past, present, and future tense helps us understand when something takes place. We use different verb tenses when we write about when something happens"). Lesson openers set the stage for learning. They get students engaged and thinking before the new information is presented.

Model. The hallmark of explicit instruction is a clear model of what students are expected to learn. A model is the strongest level of teacher support. Coyne et al. (2011) refer to modeling as establishing conspicuous strategies. Archer and Hughes (2011) refer to this part of the lesson as "I do." During the model or "I do," we should provide a demonstration of the skill along with an explanation of what is being done, often referred to as a think-aloud. In this way, students not only see how to do something but hear about it as well. We might use a catchy teaching tip to help students remember what to say or do. This tip should be said using student-friendly language. For example, to teach students how to summarize, we could use the GIST strategy. We could say and write the three parts of the gist ("Remember, find whom or what the passage is mostly about; find what is the most important thing about the whom or what; and put the two together in 12 words or less"). Many examples of developing a gist would be shown and explained to the students to make sure the complete range of possibilities is covered. Wording may include such statements as "Watch as I show you," "My turn to show you," "Listen," or "Watch me." We should be careful to control how much information is provided in the model; if the task appears too complex, it is far better to break the skill down into parts that are taught separately. We should always be mindful of what the students can handle from an instructional perspective. If not, students will experience instructional overload. They will make increased errors during guided practice.

Guided practice. Following the model, we must provide students opportunities to respond while we guide them in those responses. In guided practice, the teacher provides a moderate level of support, serving as a guide for the students. This guided practice is also called prompted practice (Meese, 2001), guided rehearsal (Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2009), or the "we do" of instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2011), because students are actively participating in the learning ("Let's do some together"). Guided practice links the presentation of new information with independent practice in a process called mediated scaffolding.

Mediated scaffolding ensures that the response opportunities are carefully controlled to promote maximum student success. At first, students may be asked to complete only part of a skill or one trial. Over time, the support is faded, allowing students a chance to complete the entire skill or multiple trials. Lower-performing students may require more scaffolding; higher-performing students may require less assistance. If the model was clear and unambiguous, students should complete the response opportunities with few, if any, errors. If their responses are correct, students should be validated. Specific praise typically pairs a positive statement with whatever the student said or did. For example, "Yes. That is the correct main idea of the paragraph" is specific to the task as contrasted with "Good job." If students say or select an incorrect answer, it is viewed as a learning opportunity. An error means that their learning is not firm. For any error, we provide a quick and immediate error correction procedure. This error correction procedure usually includes a "my turn, your turn" format. We show the students what to do and may remind them of the teaching tip they learned, using the word "remember" followed by the tip. Next, we ask the students to try it on their own. Finally, we provide a delayed test to ensure they can perform the skill after a short amount of time without our help.

The key to effective guided practice is to have students practice the skill over multiple lessons with careful guidance. Once successful in guided practice, the students move to independent practice activities.

Independent practice. After guided practice, we should give students opportunities to practice the skill on their own, without guidance from the teacher. During independent practice, the least amount of teacher support is provided; the teacher monitors the students as they practice on their own. According to Hofmeister and Lubke (1990), "The transition from guided practice to independent practice should not occur until students are at least 80% successful in their guided practice" (p. 61). That is, students should not receive independent practice opportunities until they can demonstrate success with the teacher. We must still actively monitor student performance and reteach if necessary during independent practice (Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2009). Again, if our modeling was clear and unambiguous and we provided practice opportunities of sufficient quality and quantity, then students should complete independent practice opportunities with high levels of success. According to Engelmann (1999), at the end of a lesson, students should be "virtually 100 percent firm on all tasks and activities" (p. 6).

Independent practice opportunities should be aligned to what was modeled and practiced. Error correction procedures again follow a "my turn, your turn" format. Less explanation is typically needed during the "my turn" portion of the error correction.

Homework can be assigned during independent practice if students are successful in the classroom. Successful performance means at least 90 percent or higher on independent practice activities; of course, 100 percent is best. A. Martella (2009) provided a high school student's perspective on the use of homework. She noted three important points to consider that prove helpful in assigning homework even for younger students; these points are based on a foundational paper on homework by Cooper, 1989. First, homework should be sent home only after students have mastered the information (as previously noted). Second, homework should not exceed two hours per night (recommendation is no more than ten minutes per night per grade level). Finally, homework should not be assigned before a test day.

Closing. After independent practice, there should be a brief review or statement of what was learned during the instructional session ("You learned how to summarize using

the GIST strategy. Remember, find whom or what the passage is mostly about; find what is the most important thing about the whom or what; and put the two together in 12 words or less"). This brief statement might be followed by a description of what will be learned tomorrow ("Tomorrow, you'll practice using the GIST strategy"). Students might be thanked for their participation as well during the lesson closing.

Lesson Assessment. When we assess explicit lessons, three aspects must be considered. These include mastery, maintenance, and generalization.

Mastery. We should assess students' performance during guided and independent practice to determine if students are learning and if reteaching is needed. Generally, we gauge our success as teachers by the performance of the lowest-performing students in the group; if they have mastered the material, we can be confident that others have mastered the information as well (Watkins & Slocum, 2004). Before moving to independent practice, students should be at least 80 percent correct during guided practice (Hofmeister & Lubke, 1990), virtually 100 percent correct on information taught in a current lesson, and at least 90 percent correct on skills taught earlier in the program (review opportunities) (Engelmann, 1999).

Maintenance. Maintenance checks provide review opportunities to ensure students do not forget how to perform the skill. These may occur once a week for several weeks, fading to once every two weeks, and then once a month. Coyne et al. (2011) refer to this type of maintenance check as judicious review. Maintenance checks should be 90 percent correct or higher. If performance does not reach this level, reteaching is needed.

Generalization. Generalization checks are conducted to determine if students can transfer their newly learned skills to novel situations or examples. Students may be asked to show what they know on assessment probes that mirror standardized tests, apply their skills to novel text, or expand on their skill knowledge in unique ways (e.g., develop a book cover that illustrates major and minor characters and the setting of your novel after mastering those story elements). Performance should be at least 80 percent correct; if generalization has not occurred, specific teaching is needed to ensure skill transfer occurs. Unlike "train and hope," explicit instruction is programmed for instructional success. That is, when mastery is demonstrated based on relevant skills (e.g., aligned to Common Core State Standards), transfer should occur.

What is and isn't explicit instruction?

Some consider explicit instruction to be a simple strategy, because the teacher just needs to show students how to do something and then ask them to do it. However, as we have shown, explicit instruction is far from simple. It requires a careful analysis of skills and the prerequisite building blocks that ensure success. Explicit instruction requires attention to how a lesson is opened, how the skill is taught, how guided practice opportunities are provided and how successful students are, how students respond during aligned independent practice opportunities, and how students maintain performance over time and in generalization probes. Explicit instruction works because of its careful attention to the details of instruction. It is not trial-and-error learning, discovery, exploration, facilitated learning, or some other teaching approach where teachers assist or facilitate student learning; rather the teacher's "direct actions have a direct and instructional influence on students' learning" (Carnine et al., 2010, p. 5).

We can determine if a lesson is explicit or not by examining teacher wording in the lesson "script." Explicit programs are more likely to use phrases such as "My turn," "Watch

as I show you," "Listen and watch," "This is how you do _____ ," and "Let's do some together." As you have now learned, explicit programs and instruction require teachers to model or show students how to do something, provide students with practice and feedback, and include independent activities for students to practice on their own.

If students are expected to find answers on their own without previous instruction, the lesson is probably not explicit. Phrases such as "encourage children to explore," "challenge children by saying," "help children focus by," "work with children to build an understanding of," "help them discover by," and "facilitate learning by" are used in nonexplicit programs. In this approach, teachers serve as facilitators. They provide questioning strategies to lead students as they explore; error corrections may include "Try again" or "Do you think that makes sense? Let's see." Explicit instruction is much more efficient in that it attacks the error and fixes it immediately. Errors are seen as teaching procedure errors; we do not blame students for their lack of skill performance.

What are the stages of learning?

Explicit instruction is an important part of the five stages of learning. These learning stages include acquisition, proficiency, maintenance, generalization, and adaptation (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2010).

| Acquisition | Proficiency | Maintenance | Generalization | Adaptation |

Acquisition Stage

The acquisition stage is when students are first learning a skill. In this stage of learning, assessment scores typically range from 0 percent to 80 percent (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2010). Students have little to no knowledge about what they are learning and need strong teacher support (Meese, 2001). As previously stated, explicit instruction is the most effective and efficient way we can promote student learning. When explicit instruction is delivered during acquisition, errors are diminished, and the chances of future maintenance and generalization of the skill are enhanced. The acquisition stage focuses on teaching the skill; thus, emphasis is placed on the model, guided practice (guide), and independent practice (monitor) aspects of lesson delivery. At the end of the acquisition stage, students' responses should be highly accurate, usually 80–90 percent correct (Wolery, Bailey, & Sugai, 1988). The completion of the acquisition stage does not ensure the fluent performance of the skill nor the ability to generalize to different situations. Therefore, once the acquisition stage is completed, students progress to the proficiency stage of learning.

Proficiency Stage

In the proficiency stage of learning, students practice the skill until they are fluent or automatic in their responding (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2010; Meese, 2001). Students become proficient when they learn to respond quickly given repeated opportunities to practice the skill on their own. This quick response typically begins to occur after students have demon-

strated skill acquisition during independent practice. We should provide practice opportunities including drill-and-practice and timed trials on targeted skills. Students may repeatedly read a story to improve their reading speed, for example.

Maintenance Stage

The maintenance stage of learning involves periodic practice and review opportunities to ensure skill mastery over time following independent practice. According to Meese (2001), "As students become proficient with a new skill or concept, teachers must help them retain the material over time" (p. 178). Students do not need instruction in this stage of learning. We should provide homework, seatwork, or review activities to keep students practicing and familiar with the task. Students must have opportunities to continue to perform the skill over time; if not, the skill may atrophy (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2010).

Generalization Stage

The generalization stage requires students to use their skills in novel situations. This stage of learning is also referred to as the transfer of learning (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2010). We should survey what students will be expected to do in the future. We could include assessment examples that require extended skill application such as what might be found on standardized tests. Further, we could have students use their skills with novel or expanded stories using more complex text.

Adaptation Stage

The last stage of learning is the adaptation stage where students "categorize, make decisions, see relationships/analogies, analyze, estimate, compare/contrast, show flexibility, and identify items that are irrelevant" (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2010, p. 237). Students learn to expand or extend their knowledge to do these higher-order thinking skills. At this stage, students should reflect or think about what they are doing and connect their learning to previous experiences (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2010). They complete critical thinking activities where they are required to compare and contrast stories, dig deeper into text meaning, and analyze literary and informational text as they complete, for example, book reports or story maps.

What is the research base for the use of explicit instruction?

Numerous reviews and meta-analyses have reported the effectiveness of explicit instruction. For example, Swanson (1999) conducted a meta-analysis of intervention outcomes for children and adolescents with learning disabilities (LD). Large effect sizes (ES) (using Cohen's 1988 criterion of substantive findings—.80 or higher) were noted for word recognition when direct (explicit) instruction was used (ES = 1.06) and for reading comprehension when direct (explicit) instruction was coupled with strategy-based instruction (ES = 1.15). Swanson (2001) also reported the best model for instructing students with learning disabilities after completing a meta-analysis of the research literature on effective teaching. Explicit strategy instruction including explicit practice, strategy cues (think-aloud models), and elaboration (explanations) was shown to have the largest effect size (ES = .84). Further, Vaughn, Gersten, and Chard (2000) reviewed findings of research syntheses funded by the Office of Special Education Programs and the National Center for Learning Disabilities. They noted, among other findings, that "making instruction visible and explicit is an essential feature

of effective interventions for students with LD" (p. 108). Further, these authors noted that "teachers need to plan and reflect on their instruction to assure that it is explicit and intensive so that students with LD are not robbed of valuable learning time" (p. 111). Finally, Kavale and Spaulding (in press) conducted a mega-analysis (a meta-analysis of other meta-analyses) of effective instructional practices and calculated the following mean effect sizes: direct (explicit) instruction .93; systematic instruction 2.18; drill and practice .99; feedback .97; strategy-based instruction .98. These elements are seen in explicit instructional programs.

Explicit instruction was consistently identified as an effective practice in the National Reading Panel Report (NICHD, 2000); Armbruster et al. (2006) noted the importance of explicit instruction in their discussion of research building blocks for teaching children to read. Explicit instruction was noted as important for all areas of effective reading instruction for students in grades K–3. Further, Swanson and Deshler (2003), Biancarosa (2005), Biancarosa and Snow (2006), Boardman et al. (2008), and Kamil et al. (2008) reported the effectiveness of explicit instruction for those students in grades 4–12 when it came to teaching important skills in such areas as word study, fluency, vocabulary development, and text comprehension.

Vaughn and Linan-Thompson (2003) answered the question, "So what is special about special education for students with LD?" Their answer, again based on a thorough review of the research literature, noted "students with LD benefit from explicit and systematic instruction that is closely related to their area of instructional need" (p. 145). Burns and Ysseldyke (2009) examined the frequency with which evidence-based practices were used with students with disabilities. They found direct (explicit) instruction was the most frequently used instructional methodology in their survey of special education teachers and school psychologists. No matter what research synthesis was reviewed, "the conclusions were clear: Explicit instruction should be a consistent mainstay of working with students both with and without learning difficulties" (Archer & Hughes, 2011, p. 17).

SUMMARY

Large percentages of students in our country are failing to learn to read at high levels. This skill deficit affects these students for the rest of their lives. Explicit instruction was cited as the most effective and efficient way of shortening the learning time for students. Explicit instruction is considered a systematic approach of teaching that proceeds in small steps, constantly checks for student understanding, and achieves successful student participation. It is also called demonstration-prompt-practice, antecedent prompt and test, or "I do, we do, you do." No matter what label this type of instruction is given, students are shown how to perform a task before they are expected to do it on their own.

Effective and efficient explicit instruction includes three key aspects. These include lesson planning (learning objectives and prerequisite skills), lesson delivery (opener, model, guided practice, independent practice, and closing), and lesson assessment (mastery, maintenance, and generalization). Explicit instruction may be considered simple, but it is deceptively so. Explicit instruction is complex in its attention to instructional detail. It can be distinguished from nonexplicit approaches where teachers serve as facilitators, guiding students in the learning process.

Explicit instruction is an important factor in the stages of learning. These stages include acquisition, proficiency, maintenance, generalization, and adaptation. Finally, without a doubt, the research base is strong for implementing explicit instructional practices with students with or without learning difficulties.

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