

DISTAR project rated tops nationally

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Of the Emerald

A national study commissioned by the U.S. Office of Education has tabbed an Oregon-based program as the most successful of the nation's \$500 million "Follow Through" educational projects for teaching poor children.

To University educators Wesley Becker and Siegfried Engelmann, the report that their Direct Instruction Model (DISTAR) "was largely successful in assisting disadvantaged children in catching up with their middle-class peers in academic skills" demonstrates that compensatory education can work.

Its success "carries implications for teacher training and practices, the redesign of curricula, and the redesign of school-management systems," Becker says.

Unfortunately, he adds, further development and wider implementation of the program is not being supported by the U.S. Office of Education.

Of nine model "Follow Through" programs being tested in 139 American communities, DISTAR rated highest in achieving improvement in basic and cognitive skills among some 9,200 third-graders examined.

The evaluation, carried out by Clark Abt Associates of Cambridge, Mass. and referred to as "the largest controlled educational experiment ever," followed the children from kindergarten to third grade "to provide a broad-range comparison of educational alternatives for teaching the disadvantaged and to find out what works," according to Becker.

Measured were progress in basic and cognitive skills (including math con-

cepts and problem solving), and "affect," which is a rating of children's feelings about themselves and their school and the degree to which they take responsibility for the successes and failures.

DISTAR, emphasizing small-group face-to-face instruction by teachers and aides using sequenced lessons in reading, arithmetic, and language, outperformed the other "Follow Through" programs in each category.

Having used modern behavioral principles and "advanced programming strategies" in designing the program, Becker and Engelmann attribute its success to "the highly specific teacher training, technological details, and careful monitoring of student progress."

DISTAR contrasts with those programs taking a child-centered, cognitively-focused, open-classroom approach to teaching.

Such programs "tended to perform poorly on all measures of academic progress" taken by the study, Becker says. This, he feels, "implies that other sponsors (of Follow Through programs) have not demonstrated expertise in improving educational practices."

Cognitively-oriented programs drew correspondingly low ratings in "affective measures" of a child's academic self-confidence, while behaviorally-based programs such as Becker's showed results matching higher ratings in improving academic achievement.

"The high correlation between academic and affective outcomes suggests a need to re-evaluate some interpretations of what turns kids on and how they learn to feel good about themselves in school," Becker says.

The "do-your-own-thing" approach characterizing cognitively-oriented

programs, he explains, carries the assumption that, once a child is comfortable with itself and the surroundings, it will naturally follow its own best interests in learning.

This assumption is belied by the results of the study, Becker believes.

"The crux of the matter is really whether we want to leave development of teaching methods up to the kids or up to adults who know something about it," he says.

To Becker, the national evaluation provides only a partial indication of what could be achieved with the program.

But DISTAR's future involves some discouraging limitations.

Financial support from the Office of Education is on the basis of successful sites rather than the overall success of a program. "This may be politically realistic," says Becker, "but it is not likely to produce positive changes in education."

"The current level of financial support (of DISTAR) is such that key people can be hired on only a part-time basis, and have financial problems staying with Follow Through. An important resource is being lost."

Current field efforts, he adds, "represent little more than a losing holding action, not a concerted push to improve."

Another major problem is that "no ready vehicle is available for the training of new field personnel and students in DISTAR techniques."

Except for a "modest" teacher training program within the University, Becker says, at no facility is there a program equipped to instruct key people — managers and trainers — necessary for implementing the program on a wider basis.

And teachers, says Becker, are not the only ones who need some instruction.

He explains: "As a 1975 report on Follow Through implementation indicates, administrators, principals, and college educators are not knowledgeable about implementation (regardless of the program involved) and yet they are frequently in position to foul up programs."

He would like to see a training effort directed at these people as well as at teachers and aides.

Becker sees a further need to extend DISTAR to higher grades.

Compensatory education, he says, assumes that once poor third-graders leave Follow Through they enter an "average" classroom that should "teach them the important language skills that are required for entry into nearly every academic pursuit and most desirable life pursuits."

Actually they go into a system that does not teach them these skills, says Becker.

"Middle-class children learn these skills largely at home from their parents. The opportunities provided for the middle-class child in language learning are not available for many poverty children, which means that the latter are discriminated against in typical school programs."

"The remedy for this situation is to extend DISTAR at least through sixth grade," he says.

DISTAR's success in 19 cities — achieved, Becker says, despite the fact that the program "was not fully implemented in any" of the sites — convinces its developers that it can be "a source of expert input" for the design of curricula.

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Grill

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salads & desserts
open 7:30-2

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specials from
11:30-1:30

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