

Mastery Learning in Reading and the Control of Teachers and Students

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The notion that everyone can learn to read in school is an attractive goal which has been a central tenet of free public education since its inception. Regardless of the goal's attraction, it has been difficult to realize, but not for lack of effort nor for alternative "solutions." Most of these solutions have been successful within specific circumstances, but the lack of a general solution remains a concern to those who believe that all human thoughts and behaviors can be explained according to universal rules. Mastery learning is a recent alternative which has received considerable discussion and much reported success (Hyman and Cohen 1979). Mastery learning procedures have been incorporated in elementary and secondary reading programs across the United States (Schmidt 1982) because its advocates maintain that the goal of universal literacy can be reached if three assumptions are met: (1) reading instruction is segmented into separate skills which are arranged hierarchically according to difficulty, (2) teachers engage in a teach/test/reteach/retest instructional cycle, and (3) students are given unlimited time to learn one skill before progressing to the next skill in the hierarchy (Block and Burns 1977; Bloom 1976).

Several writers have suggested that these basic assumptions are fundamentally flawed as they relate to how children learn (Giroux 1983; Postman 1979; Smith 1978), but with the recent popularity of "direct instruction" and the "back to basics" movement, many school districts are foregoing the debate of basic assumptions and are attempting to translate mastery theory into current school practices. If reports from two celebrated mastery learning reading programs are indicative of this translation, then mastery learning and reading instruction may not be as compatible as school districts first imagined, and their forced association may have severe consequences for teachers and students.

Attempting to document the consequences of the translation, this article presents statements by Michael Katims, Director of the Mastery Learning Department for the Chicago Public School District, and results from a study of a former model school district for the Right to Read Program. These districts were selected as information sources because they currently serve as models for other school districts considering mastery learning for their reading programs. (See Arricale 1983; Levine 1982 for information concerning Chicago serving as a model and Schoephoester 1980 for the Right to Read District.) The evidence from these two school districts suggests that schools cannot meet the basic assumptions of mastery learning even if they believe them to be true and that administrators embrace

mastery learning to assuage managerial concerns as well as for academic reasons. Specifically, three assertions find support: (1) mastery learning is adopted in an attempt to legitimize reading programs to the public; (2) as a result, schools cannot meet the basic mastery learning assumption of unlimited time for learning to read; and (3) under these conditions, teachers are reduced to managers of materials during mastery learning reading instruction and both teachers and students surrender control of their literacy.

Assertion One: Legitimacy for Reading Programs

Traditionally, schools legitimized themselves in society by garnering public confidence through the establishment and control of teacher certification, student status, and curricular topics (Meyer and Rowan 1978). That is, as long as the public has confidence in teachers, students, and curricula, schools can proceed without close public scrutiny. However, the public has recently challenged schools in each of these areas (Goldberg and Harvey 1983; Graham 1983). While the public continues to support reading instruction as an important school function, it finds the quality of teachers wanting, the literacy of students declining, and the curricula lacking. Moreover, the public demands a verifiably better product for its tax money (Gratiot 1980). To regain the public's confidence in education in general and in reading programs in particular, schools seek mechanisms to counteract public concern through documentation of students' reading competence. Mastery learning with its optimistic philosophy and ideology of tight control of teacher and student behavior is an attractive alternative.

As administrators from the two districts suggest below, schools do indeed adopt mastery learning for this utilitarian reason as well as for its philosophy. By designing a reading program around the teach/test instructional cycle, schools believe they can produce test results that will certify that all students have become masters of reading before they graduate and that will relieve public concern for student literacy (Cohen 1981). Furthermore, the rhetoric which accompanies mastery learning will fulfill public doubts concerning the ability of teachers. Schools can offer poor instruction as the culprit for past unsatisfactory performance (Hyman and Cohen 1979), and they can suggest that with the technical guidance of mastery learning curriculum developers, effective reading instruction can be provided for students. (Schoephoester 1980).

The first statement below addresses the Chicago School District's acceptance of the philosophy of mastery learning; the second presents their need for legitimacy and implies their intention to raise test scores to regain that legitimacy.

The system is based on a theory that has been successful in other areas, a system that has as its explicit goal the achievement of reading success for all students (Smith and Katims 1979, p. 201).

Each summer Chicago girds itself for its two regularly scheduled disasters: The Chicago Cubs and the newspaper publication of reading test scores. Though the overwhelmingly complex and arduous task of improving the Cubs is readily comprehended by the Chicago citizenry, they do get testy from time to time about those scores (Smith and Katims 1979, p. 199).

Administrators from the Right to Read District listed the following objectives in the printed description of their reading program, "A Course of Study to Guide Reading Instruction." Objective 4 concisely restates mastery learning philosophy, and objectives 8 and 24 present their intentions to regain legitimacy through objective testing and distribution of the resulting information.

Objective 4: The assumption is made that children can master the basic skills given appropriate instruction and time.

Objective 8: A criterion-referenced testing system is used to provide objective evidence of pupil's mastery of basic skills.

Objective 24: The reading program is defined and information is made available to the communities served by the schools, to the Board of Education, and to others who have an interest.

Assertion Two: Instructional Time Is Limited in Schools

Since the turn of the century, schools have typically segmented instructional time in several ways (Callahan 1962) and each segmentation in turn limits the time for learning to read. Many schools divide each day into periods for various curricular subjects (Jackson 1968) and assign reading instruction to one, or less frequently two, of those periods (Durkin 1978-79). This act disturbs the continuity of instruction and limits the amount of immediate practice available to students who experience difficulty with a particular skill. Then at regular intervals during the school year, teachers report to parents on their child's reading activities, and all concerned expect considerable progress to be made during these intervals. These expectations apply pressure on teachers to move their students through the materials regardless of mastery of individual skills (Shannon 1983). Each June, decisions are made concerning promotion to the next grade (King 1973) and finally, threshold points are set for decisions about graduation from elementary and secondary schools (Greenstein 1983). These decisions are based in part on reading competence, and the criteria for the decisions become more rigid as the public demands greater accountability from schools (Postman 1979). Clearly, the time for learning to read is not limitless in most schools; subjective and objective factors provide incentive for teachers to maintain a standard pace for their reading instruction.

These limitations on time impair any attempt to initiate mastery learning practices. Without unlimited time to learn each separate skill, the logic of mastery learning is violated and there is no theoretical guarantee that all students will learn to read. Mastery learning reading programs are reduced to two basic assumptions—a hierarchical set of goals and a teach-and-test instructional philosophy. However, limitations on time also affect these basic assumptions of mastery learning. First, because even the slowest students must become masters of reading within established time limits, reading goals are set at a minimal level (Brown 1978) and are restricted to easily definable and testable skills. With this act, some reading goals usually associated with mature reading ability are excluded from

mastery learning reading curricula because they are time-consuming to teach, many students may not be able to master them, and they are difficult to test. For example, critical reading is excluded from mastery learning curricula, but it is considered the crux of mature reading by such ideologically diverse experts as Giroux (1983), Resnick and Resnick (1977), and Richardson, Fisk, and Okun (1983). However, all students, the fast and the slow, are limited to the mastery learning curriculum. For example in Chicago, "Mastery learning instruction in elementary reading is not practical if 50-60% of the pupils cannot achieve mastery by the time of the formative test" (Katims and Jones 1981, p. 4).

Second, the teach/test/reteach/retest instructional cycle is distorted by the limits on instructional time. As administrators from the two districts stated in the first set of quotations and iterate below, test results provide objective evidence for decision making, and reading competence is defined as a student's ability to demonstrate mastery of criterion-referenced tests within given time constraints. Because each skill must be tested separately to ensure mastery and instructional time is limited, a small number of test items, often in a multiple choice format, determine whether or not a student has mastered a certain reading skill. Some educational researchers have questioned the validity and reliability of such tests (Johnson and Pearson 1975; Kavale 1979). Regardless of this criticism, these formal tests become the sole arbiters of students' reading ability.

In a series of articles, Katims explains the limitations on time for learning to read, states administrators' response to a lack of standard student progress, and describes the test's role and authority within the Chicago Mastery Learning Reading Program. As can be seen, teachers are expected to produce objective evidence of students' mastery of reading skills within a limited time.

In Chicago, promotion to high school has been limited to progress through the matrix of reading objectives. The promotion policy specifies that pupils who have not mastered 80% of the objectives in each of the 13 reading levels shall be retained in elementary school an additional year (Hannon and Katims 1979, p. 122).

Even a more vexing problem was the citywide dilemma that students were not making appropriate progress through the matrix of objectives and tests . . . So a system of administratively imposed expectations or goals and accompanying monitoring procedures were instituted (Katims and Jones 1981, p. 3).

Under the program on the other hand, the teacher instructs the entire class, the pupil then works on related activities, and then a formative test determines what the pupil does next (Katims 1979, p. 41).

Administrators from the Right to Read District also ascribed considerable authority to tests, as can be seen in the first quotation below. In response to a questionnaire 445 classroom teachers and 23 reading teachers from this district provided similar information concerning the criterion-referenced test, the procedure for record keeping, and their perceptions of consequent pressure on their reading instruction (Shannon 1983). In the second statement below, a middle school teacher presents the gist of these responses.

The Tests of Basic Skills are designed to enable a teacher to know whether each one of his or her pupils has learned what it is that has been taught at each level of instruction through the use of the materials which compose the reading program. ("A Course of Study to Guide Reading Instruction").

We are required to record the skills test scores and the dates that the tests were taken on student file cards. These cards are reviewed every other week by our reading teacher. Sometimes, the principal looks at them and announces whose class is doing well over the loud speaker. Every eight weeks or so we fill out report cards by checking off the objectives that have been passed and send them home to the parents. Of course, there is pressure to hurry students through the materials (Shannon 1983).

Assertion Three: Not Teachers But Managers

In schools which use mastery learning theory to legitimize their reading program the complex problem which faces all schools—how to develop all students' literacy—is reduced to a clearly defined problem of management—how to allocate resources (teachers, students, and materials) to produce the maximum number of certified literate students within the designated time. Theoretically, mastery learning requires teachers to design and to develop their own tests and instruction for both initial and subsequent attempts at each reading skill (Block and Burns 1977; Bloom 1976). This procedure, though time-consuming, is essential to ensure that teachers are clearly aware of the instructional goals and the formats in which those goals will be tested (Knight 1981; Mueller 1976). However, schools attempting to legitimize their reading programs cannot afford the considerable time required for individual teachers to develop their own materials because students must become literate within established time limits. Moreover, the school districts cannot use the subjective information that the teacher-made tests would afford because they believe the public does not trust teachers' judgement and they need objective evidence of student progress.

Since all students are expected to learn the same skills throughout their districts, schools create (e.g., Chicago) or more often purchase (e.g., the Right to Read District) a packaged set of objective tests, books, and instructional manuals and seek to standardize teachers' use of these materials. In this way, teachers' reading instruction and students' reading progress become predictable and calculable. Because the tests are matched closely with the instruction recommended in the teacher manuals (Johnson and Pearson 1975), administrators can monitor teachers' application of materials and student progress through the materials with periodic review of the test results in the manner which the middle school teacher stated above (Cohen 1981). Thus, the application of packaged materials becomes the only acceptable instructional practice, the materials transcend teacher judgement, and teachers have control of their reading instruction taken away from them. The quotations which follow demonstrate that all important decisions usually associated with teaching (curricular, instructional, and evaluative) are made outside of the classroom beyond the teachers' control. School districts which adopt mastery

learning to regain public confidence and cannot meet its basic assumption of unlimited time, subordinate teachers to the materials as a matter of administrative policy.

In five statements, Chicago administrators describe the need and the method to control teachers' behavior during reading instruction: teachers experience constant difficulties with reading instruction, packaged materials will alleviate these problems, and teachers simply assist the materials.

Under traditional teaching, students are usually placed in reading groups. The groups primarily spend time reading. There is no real instruction in reading (Katims 1979, p. 32).

Moreover, teachers had constant problems in preparing, storing, grading and organizing the diversity of appropriate instructional materials each day (Katims and Jones 1981, p. 6).

Providing materials that were centrally developed and successfully field tested would 1) reduce greatly the time needed to prepare and organize materials; 2) require little inservice time; 3) be economical for schools in Chicago and elsewhere to implement; 4) standardize the definition, sequencing, and quality of instruction necessary for mastery of each objective; 5) avoid some of the problems associated with exclusive reliance on basal reader instruction; 6) allow teachers to focus on teaching the students the contents of these materials; 7) reduce greatly the time needed for developing lesson plans; and 8) be easy for substitutes to use . . . (Katims and Jones 1981, p. 7).

No prior grouping is required on the part of the teacher, instruction is laid out in detail, identification of pupils who need remediation and what skills they need help on is done by objective testing, and the amount of remediation and materials for the remediation are provided. (Smith and Katims 1979, p. 201).

Remedial exercises are designed to provide additional instruction, additional practice, and something similar to additional testing. They are designed to be done by pupils alone with the teacher roving the classroom to assess progress (Smith and Katims 1979, p. 201).

Administrators and teachers from the Right to Read District put their instructional faith in commercially prepared reading materials. Below, the Director of Reading explains why a single set of these materials was needed in the district, and then two policy statements from the printed description of the district explain administrators' expectations for the use of these materials. District personnel were well aware of administrators' expectations and by their own reports they met these expectations. In response to a questionnaire over ninety percent of the 445 classroom teachers and 18 principals agreed strongly that administrators would not tolerate reading instruction without the commercial materials (Shannon 1983).

This is a large district with a mobile population. We found a basal series with a strong curriculum that we want all our teachers to follow. That way we can easily accommodate the student who moves from one school to another; the teachers in those schools are doing the same thing (Shannon 1983).

Teachers cannot change the pupils, or the materials, or the scope and sequence of skills ("A Course of Study to Guide Reading Instruction").

The correct action that should be taken with the pupil, or the group of pupils, who fails to reach the critical score on a subtest of the test is prescribed in the teacher's manuals that accompany the reading program ("A Course of Study to Guide Reading Instruction").

Conclusion

If other school districts follow the examples of these two celebrated districts, and many seem to be, one major result will be that teachers become managers of reading materials rather than teachers of reading. Where teachers were once valued for their knowledge of reading and reading instruction, they will become valued for their ability to apply the packaged materials in the prescribed manner regardless of the needs, interests, and abilities of their students. Since commercial authors and curricular committees prepare the methods and materials used in acceptable reading instruction, teachers' knowledge of theory, instruction, and their students is rendered useless, and they are given little incentive to improve that knowledge. Within these programs, objectivity (the packaged materials) transcends subjectivity (teacher judgement). The inversion of objectivity and subjectivity during reading instruction has been called "reification" (Shannon 1983) or "technicalization" (Postman 1979) of instruction. Reification occurs when participants in reading instruction treat the objective methods and materials as the only rational type of instruction, and they subordinate their own subjective judgement to the rationality of the materials. The two examples which follow demonstrate the potential harm to students in reified instruction.

Schmidt (1982), a substitute teacher in the Chicago District and the recipient of an International Reading Association journalism award, reported the following incident concerning the Chicago Mastery Learning Reading Program. After the release of high school students' test scores which indicated that the average eleventh grade student read at the twenty-fifth percentile on a norm-referenced test (a decline of five percent since 1975), the superintendent of schools appointed a task force of district administrators to make recommendations to improve high schools' performance. After several weeks, rather than repudiate the mastery learning reading program which produced these readers, the committee recommended an extension of the mastery learning reading program into the high schools. These administrators were unable to look beyond their reified reading program to find a solution to this formidable problem.

During interviews in the Right to Read District, nine reading and classroom teachers provided similar versions of an attempt to change the reading curriculum (Shannon 1983). According to these personnel, three teachers sought to postpone a few objectives because "the good and the bad, the fast and the slow students had great difficulty mastering them during third grade." The initial request was rejected because "the curriculum is not to blame for student failure" and "teachers cannot change the scope and sequence of skills." The teachers appealed to an author of the commercial materials during an inservice presentation for the teachers from a "slow school" (a school in which students were not making expected progress

through the materials). The author explained that their complaint was common among teachers using the materials in other school districts, and the objectives were postponed in a new edition of materials. Armed with this information, the teachers' renewed request was accepted on the condition that they continue to teach toward the objectives until the new edition was purchased. Again, participants who reified reading instruction as the application of packaged materials were unable to accommodate solutions to instructional problems which required even modest change in the program.

In these examples, and there were more from each district, well-meaning participants were unable to find and to accept solutions to instructional problems from outside the orthodoxy of their reified reading programs. Rather than ask basic questions concerning the propriety of the program, they sought to fix fundamental problems with minor adjustments within their present system. The results were teachers who applied and students who received questionable "instruction." Mastery learning per se does not require administrators and teachers to reify reading instruction, rather it is schools' inability to reconcile their strong need to regain and retain legitimacy for their reading programs with basic mastery learning assumption of unlimited time to learn. This condition creates the contradiction of offering a reading program that cannot meet students' instructional needs as the solution to the problem of students not learning to read in schools.

However, the contradiction also affords teachers the opportunity to question attempts to regain legitimacy through control of participants and to examine mastery learning as a realistic solution to the problem of universal literacy. If teachers look critically at their situation, they will see that legitimacy through control and mastery learning includes a cynical denial of the human essence of literacy and learning. Rather than using literacy as a source of knowledge and power to understand the world better, school districts which incorporate mastery learning to regain legitimacy use reading and reading instruction to limit teachers' and students' thoughts and behaviors to the definitions and practices included in the mastery learning curriculum. Teachers need not look much further to recognize the underlying industrial ideology which serves as the basis for both legitimacy through control and mastery learning (Giroux 1983; 1984). With this discovery, teachers must also acknowledge their contribution to the perpetuation of this ideology; they accept mastery learning assumptions without debate of fundamental issues, and they control students' learning of literacy in school through the practice of mastery learning. Under these conditions, students are rendered almost powerless, either they learn to read critically outside of the classroom or they accept the teachers as a model and follow explicitly the direction in the packaged mastery learning materials. To correct these injustices, teachers must accept responsibility to become their own experts concerning literacy and learning, they must engage in discussion of first principles, they must act collectively to regain control of their instruction, and they must find ways to help students become self-reliant readers and learners.

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All beginnings are hard.

I can remember hearing my mother murmur those words while I lay in bed with fever. "Children are often sick, darling. That's the way it is with children. All beginnings are hard. You'll be all right soon."

I remember bursting into tears one evening because a passage of Bible commentary had proved too difficult for me to understand. I was about nine years old at the time. "You want to understand everything immediately?" my father said. "Just like that? You only began to study this commentary last week. All beginnings are hard. You have to work at the job of studying. Go over it again and again."

The man who later guided me in my studies would welcome me warmly into his apartment and, when we sat at his desk, say to me in his gentle voice, "Be patient, David. The midrash says, 'All beginnings are hard.' You cannot swallow all the world at one time."

I say it to myself today when I stand before a new class at the beginning of a school year or am about to start a new book or research paper: All beginnings are hard. Teaching the way I do is particularly hard, for I touch the raw nerves of faith, the beginnings of things. Often students are shaken. I say to them what was said to me: "Be patient. You are learning a new way of understanding the Bible. All beginnings are hard." And sometimes I add what I have learned on my own: "Especially a beginning that you make by yourself. That's the hardest beginning of all."

Chaim Potok
In the Beginning

Mastery learning means that information is not simply memorized for a test, but is learned at the level of understanding. Students in a mastery learning environment expect to learn and grow. They believe they can succeed. This is key in the learning process and in life. Preparation For Life Long Learning. Mastery learning teaches students how to learn. However, in the mastery learning model, Bloom stated that teacher-student relationships are greatly altered and the potential of low achievers is increased. Bloom recognized that one aspect of mastery learning is learning in sequence, where sequencing is described as hierarchical. Thus, mastery of each step prior to advancing to the next step is essential. The Keller strategy asks students to learn by reading, whereas the Bloom strategy asks students to learn by reading, hearing lectures, and/or participating in discussions. In Bloom's strategy, the original instruction is teacher-paced; whereas in Keller's approach, it is student or self-paced (Block, 1974). Today she joins us from larasmusic.com to share about her journey of learning to sight read and the important lessons she learned along the way. "Evan, SightReadingMastery Founder. While most teachers agree that sight-reading is one of the most important skills you need to develop, few actually incorporate it into their lesson plans or suggested practice routines. Dr. Dianne Hardy, Assistant Professor of Music Education and Piano at Dickinson State University, explains in her study regarding teaching sight-reading. She believes that success is dependent on mastering the basics, so she specializes in teaching the basics with an emphasis on sight-reading to the point of mastery so as to build an indestructible foundation for her students.