

Morningside Academy: A Private Sector Laboratory for Effective Instruction

BY CARL BINDER

Most current discussions about educational reform downplay the critical role of instructional method, or what is often referred to as “pedagogy.” Efforts to envision and design “new American schools” and analyses of educational problems that need to be solved generally focus on administrative and contextual factors, e.g., economic conditions, crime and family difficulties, teacher compensation, accountability, and school management schemes designed to provide more opportunities for innovation and choice. While these issues are certainly important, there is compelling evidence to suggest that improved instructional methods can compensate for significant deficiencies in school management, socio-economic conditions, and other factors beyond the control of classroom educators.¹

On the whole, public schools are not receptive to teaching methods that produce dramatic, measurable improvements in learning. While such a statement might seem harsh, one need only look at the cases of Jaime Escalante,² Marva Collins,³ and other exemplary educators who have produced near-miracles in the classroom. For example, Escalante demonstrated that inner-city students, some with histories of repeated

failure, can pass advanced placement calculus tests in record numbers, given effective instruction. His story was widely publicized in a popular movie (*Stand and Deliver*). Nonetheless, he has been either ignored or actively opposed by his colleagues to the extent that he recently left one school district in hopes of receiving support elsewhere for his effective teaching.

Many less well-known teachers have encountered similar resistance to non-mainstream methods that produce huge improvements in learning. Research demonstrating such results has generally been ignored by the educational establishment.⁴ As a consequence, many effective educators have either left teaching in frustration or have reverted to more conventional teaching methods—as a professional survival tactic. A few exceptionally motivated individuals have chosen to create their own schools or tutoring agencies in order to “push the envelope” of what is educationally possible without having to compromise the goal of producing maximum learning gains in students. In making this choice for excellence, often with great personal sacrifice of security and income, these people have attempted to create “laboratories” for developing and demonstrating effective instructional methods and

• CARL BINDER, PH.D. is president of PT/MS, Inc., a Boston-area consulting firm, and has been a frequent contributor to Youth Policy Institute journals on topics related to the improvement of education. Contact him at P.O. Box 169, Nonantum, MA 02195 (617)332-2656.

FUTURE CHOICES

materials. In America's search for solutions to the current educational crisis, we would do well to look toward some of these private sector efforts.

One such exceptional educator is Dr. Kent Johnson, Director of the Morningside Academy in Seattle. Dr. Johnson is a master of educational method and curriculum design. After receiving his doctorate and working with some of the most advanced data-based educators in the country, Johnson held a number of academic and teaching positions, but was frustrated by resistance to effective instruction. In 1981 he founded Morningside, beginning with a small tutoring center in his living room. Now, more than ten

years later, he has demonstrated that attention to systematic, data-based instructional design principles and self-paced learning can produce unheard-of educational gains while improving students' confidence and self-esteem.

learned, resistance to distraction, and the ability to apply new learning to more complex tasks. Direct Instruction is a combination of teaching methods for working with students in small groups and a set of principles for designing and sequencing instructional activities and materials. Finally, Tiemann and Markle's approach to instructional design is a powerful methodology for analyzing instructional objectives, developing teaching methods and materials, testing them, and revising them based on measured results.

The following brief description of Morningside Academy recounts its astonishing effectiveness, and summarizes the general proc-

Dr. Kent Johnson has demonstrated that attention to systematic, data-based instructional design principles and self-paced learning can produce unheard-of educational gains while improving students' confidence and self-esteem.

years later, he has demonstrated that attention to systematic, data-based instructional design principles and self-paced learning can produce unheard-of educational gains while improving students' confidence and self-esteem.

The Morningside program combines principles from at least four distinct sources of instructional technology: the Personalized System of Instruction,⁵ Direct Instruction,⁶ Precision Teaching,⁷ and the instructional design methods of Tiemann and Markle.⁸ The Personalized System of Instruction provides a structure for allowing students to work at their own pace through units of curriculum so that they are able to attain mastery at each step before proceeding to the next. Precision Teaching uses brief timed practice and measurement sessions on finely sequenced steps in a curriculum to enable students to achieve fluency—speed plus accuracy of performance—on each critical skill or unit of knowledge. Fluency ensures retention of what is

ess of instruction that it provides for students. Morningside is perhaps one of the most cost-effective educational programs in North America. As such, it supports the view that improvements in instructional method can have dramatic effects on students' achievement. It also exemplifies a movement among exceptional educators to create working environments in which they can teach as effectively as possible without having to constantly resist peer and administrative pressure to conform. Recently, Dr. Johnson, working with the Malcolm X College in inner-city Chicago and with colleagues at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, has replicated Morningside's program in a new socio-economic and cultural environment. Because it is based on sound, data-based principles of instructional design and implementation, the program can be adapted to different settings—a key criterion for successful models of new American schools.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION

ENDNOTES

- ¹ C.L. Watkins, "Project Follow Through: A Story of the Identification and Neglect of Effective Instruction," *Youth Policy*, 10(7), July, 1988, 7-11; Carl Binder, "Precision Teaching: Measuring and Attaining Exemplary Academic Achievement," *Youth Policy*, 10(7), July 1988, 12-15; Binder and Watkins, "Promoting Effective Instructional Methods: Solutions to America's Educational Crisis," *Future Choices*, 1(3), Fall, 1988, 33-39.
- ² J. Mathews, *Escalante: The Best Teacher In America*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1988).
- ³ M. Collins and C. Tamarkin, *Marva Collins' Way*, (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Archer, Inc., 1982).
- ⁴ Watkins, "Project Follow Through."
- ⁵ *The Personalized System of Instruction: 48 Seminal Papers*, eds. J.G. Sherman, G. Ruskin and G.B. Semb. (Lawrence, KS: TRI Publications, 1982).
- ⁶ S. Engelmann and D.W. Carnine, *Theory of Instruction: Principles and Applications*, (New York: Irvington, 1982).
- ⁷ Binder and Watkins, "Precision Teaching and Direct Instruction: Measurably Superior Instructional Technology In Schools," *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 3(4), 1990, 74-96.
- ⁸ P.W. Tieman and Susan M. Markle, *Analyzing Instructional Content: A Guide to Instruction and Evaluation*, 4th edition, (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Co., 1990).

WORKS CONSULTED

- Binder, C. "Precision Teaching: Measuring and Attaining Exemplary Academic Achievement." *Youth Policy*, 10 (7), 1988, 12-15.
- Binder, C., & Watkins, C. L. "Promoting Effective Instructional Methods: Solutions to America's Educational Crisis." *Future Choices*, 1 (3), 1989, 33-39.
- Binder, C. and Watkins, C. L. "Precision Teaching and Direct Instruction: Measurably Superior Instructional Technology in Schools." *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 3(4), 1990, 74-96.
- Collins, M. & Tamarkin, C. *Marva Collins' Way*. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1982.
- Engelmann, S., & Carnine, D. W. *Theory of Instruction: Principles and Applications*. New York: Irvington, 1982.
- Mathews, J. *Escalante: The Best Teacher in America*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1988.
- The Personalized System of Instruction: 48 Seminal Papers*, Sherman, J. G., Ruskin, G., and Semb, G. B. eds., Lawrence, KS: TRI Publications.
- Tiemann, P. W., & Markle, Susan M. *Analyzing Instructional Content: A Guide To Instruction and Evaluation*, 4th edition. Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing Co., 1990.
- Watkins, C. L. "Project Follow Through: A Story of the Identification and Neglect of Effective Instruction." *Youth Policy*, 10 (7), 1988, 7-11.