

A Fight Over Reading Instruction in a District Weary of Change

**By Samuel G. Freedman
Rockford, Ill.**

WHEN Dennis Thompson took over as school superintendent in this struggling factory city last May, he thought he recognized the gravity of its woes. He knew the district had gone through a divisive battle over desegregation in the late 1980's. He knew that a decade under court supervision had resulted in higher taxes and white flight, without educational gains. As it turned out, he didn't know the half of it.

Using the kind of short-term borrowing that nearly brought New York City to bankruptcy, Dr. Thompson's predecessors had rung up a cumulative deficit of \$50 million, the equivalent of nearly one-fifth of the annual budget. The State of Illinois had prohibited the district from issuing any more debt and threatened to take over its finances. By the summer of 2004, 30 of the 52 schools had landed in the State Education Department's categories of "warning," "watch" and "corrective action."

Years of poor management and powerful unions had left Mr. Thompson with a work force that included nine full-time grass-cutters and only two curriculum specialists. He laid off about 360 teachers and aides from a total staff of 4,000 to reduce the district deficit and transferred 800 others, largely to comply with seniority provisions in the union contract. He compared it to "rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic."

One of the only bright spots appeared to be the Lewis Lemon elementary school. With a student body that was 80 percent nonwhite and 85 percent poor, the school recorded some of the highest scores in Rockford on statewide tests. On a reading test, Lemon's third graders trailed only those from a school for the gifted.

Lemon's principal, Tiffany Parker, had accomplished all this by embracing a method of teaching reading known as "direct instruction." Intended to address the needs of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, direct instruction provides teachers with scripted lessons, heavy on drilling and repetition, that emphasize phonics - that is, learning words by sounding them out.

Ericton Lewis moved his son Ericton Jr. to Lewis Lemon after three frustrating years at a school that did not use direct instruction. By the end of fifth grade, the boy's second year at Lewis Lemon, he had earned his way onto the honor roll and grown so proficient as a reader that he regularly picked up the music magazine *Vibe* for pleasure.

In the last several months, however, Ms. Parker and Lewis Lemon have collided with Dr. Thompson and his agenda for reform. Instead of serving as beacons for what is possible, the school and its principal have been portrayed as impediments to progress. The superintendent recently transferred Ms. Parker to a middle school, and has begun phasing out direct instruction in favor of an approach known as balanced literacy.

In that respect, the battle in Rockford is a microcosm of the debate nationally over how to teach reading, particularly to at-risk and minority children. Advocates of balanced literacy - including school officials in New York City who installed it several years ago - insist that it splits the difference between the highly traditional style of direct instruction and the progressive “whole language” method that eschews phonics and spelling. The handful of pupils who actually need intensive drilling in phonics can receive it as an “intervention.”

In the academy and the pages of education journals, the dispute can proceed at the level of competing theories and studies. Telescoped down into a school of 400 children in a city of 150,000, the argument cannot help but be personal and emotional.

“Do we teach the same skills with balanced literacy? Yes,” said Robin Paschal, the new reading coordinator at Lewis Lemon. “Do we want to bring children to a level of mastery? Yes. But in a brain-based way. Are we addressing that when we use direct instruction? No.”

What Ms. Paschal meant became clear in the course of visiting two classes at two schools. In one of the remaining direct-instruction classes at Lewis Lemon, the teacher, Janice Butitta, stood in front of 17 fourth graders, holding a wire-bound manual with a word-by-word script for the morning's lesson. As they read through a story, each pupil reciting a paragraph aloud, they were learning the day's vocabulary words - bathroom, homework, realizing, practicing.

An hour later, across town at the Conklin Elementary School, Kelly Brooks sat with several of her fifth graders at a small U-shaped table, discussing one chapter of the children's novel “The Barn.” She asked about the traits and actions of the main characters, and reminded them to write in their “Reader's Journal” notebook about “someone you know well and what qualities that person has.” As those pupils moved on to work independently, Ms. Brooks invited another group to the table with their books.

That the activity in Conklin was more interesting to an adult was beyond question. And to Superintendent Thompson, Rockford cannot improve its overall performance without using one reading method for the whole district, so that all teachers can be trained in it. A retired Army lieutenant colonel, he also made it plain that he could not tolerate Ms. Parker's disobeying orders.

“This is not a curriculum issue alone with her,” he said. “It is a leadership issue. Good leaders need to be good followers first.”

OF her refusal to adopt balanced literacy, Ms. Parker said, “Basically, what you're going to do is sentence a child to a life of poverty because you're never going to give some of the most vulnerable kids the tools to become self-reliant.”

After blanket coverage of the controversy in the local paper and a meeting with Dr. Thompson, the Lewis Lemon parents know the arguments against direct instruction.

Some, if not all, are aware that Lewis Lemon's scores for fifth graders fall well below those for third graders - something that district administrators attribute to the limitations of direct instruction and that Ms. Parker largely ascribes to an inexperienced teaching corps at the higher grade level. Having seen desegregation fail, magnet schools falter, superintendents come and go, the parents have railed against losing the one thing they have seen succeed.

“I’m shocked,” Ericton Lewis said. “It’s like now all these kids are going to be lost. I can’t understand why they would take a program that was working and get rid of it. Why fix something if it ain’t broke?”