

A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE DISTAR INSTRUCTIONAL
SYSTEM IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL READING PROGRAMS

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Carl R. Anderson", is written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE DISTAR INSTRUCTIONAL
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This study investigated teacher opinions of the Direct Instruction Systems for Teaching Arithmetic and Reading (Distar Reading only) when used in elementary special education classrooms. A survey was sent to 116 special education teachers employed by small school districts in southeastern Texas. The survey consisted of 21 multiple choice items with space provided for additional comments. The first item asked respondents to state if they had used Distar Reading. If not, they were to return the survey without further responses. In this way a discrimination could be made between "returns" and those not using Distar Reading. If the respondents had ever used Distar Reading I, II, or III they were to complete the survey and return it in the pre-addressed and stamped envelopes. There was an 80% return.

Although Distar was developed for disadvantaged or slow learning students, only 17% of the respondents indicated that their slowest students improved. The respondents reported that in general, the students seemed to like and pay attention to Distar Reading instruction, yet the teachers themselves were less satisfied with the program. They showed strong opposition to claims that Distar is easy to teach and requires little daily preparation. Even though 71% of the teachers taught Distar regularly, 71% also modified the program in some way. Results indicated that Distar Reading has not been widely used by the majority of special

education teachers although they were aware of its existence. Although the results of this study do not confirm the results reported by the developers of the Distar Reading System, there were too few subjects included to justify generalization. A need for further research is indicated by the current findings to discover why Distar Reading is not more widely used in the public schools in this area of Texas.

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INTRODUCTION

There are numerous approaches to beginning reading instruction. While some programs are loosely structured and child-centered, others are highly structured and controlled. One such structured approach is Distar Reading. Although this program, developed by Siegfried Engelmann and Elaine C. Bruner (1969), differs a great deal from the traditional programs found in most Texas schools, its authors believe it to be highly effective in teaching disadvantaged and mildly retarded children to read. Hammill and Bartel (1975) report that the Distar Reading program is indeed well-organized and well-written, however, they state a need for more verification and research on the program.

Distar is an acronym for Direct Instruction Systems for Teaching Arithmetic and Reading but has recently been expanded to include Language. Distar Arithmetic and Language are similar to the Reading in philosophy and approach in that all contain carefully structured and sequenced tasks. The Systems focus on student responses, immediate feedback, positive reinforcement, and parental involvement.

The Distar Reading materials evolved during several years of research in one of the programs being conducted at the Institute for Research on Exceptional Children at the University of Illinois. According to Aukerman (1971) the study concentrated on children who were socio-economically disadvantaged and thus qualified as "exceptional" in that state.

The style of citation is that of Exceptional Children.

Distar Reading is a highly structured program dealing especially with code-breaking skills. The materials were designed primarily for preschool or primary grade children and are packaged in a "kit" format. The instructional techniques and the programmed sequence of the objectives were intended to make the system especially appropriate for students who have traditionally had difficulty learning from other materials. The Distar Reading program is based on principles that have often been recommended for establishing sound instructional programs. These principles include: (a) precise behavioral objectives; (b) teacher training; (c) materials relevant to the behavioral objectives; (d) providing motivation; (e) reinforcing successful behavior; (f) maintaining regular, consistent, and frequent instruction; (g) individualization; and (h) parental involvement (Gordon, 1971).

The Distar Reading kits purport to contain all of the materials and directions needed to successfully teach children the skills they need to read. The reading program consists of three consecutive parts--Reading I, II, and III. Reading I concentrates on basic decoding skills and later introduces oral and written comprehension skills. More complex decoding skills and comprehension tasks are presented in Reading II. Reading III enables the children to learn from factual material and textbooks. The kits for the Distar Reading program include: Teacher Presentation Books, Test Books, Teacher Guides, Spelling Books, Story Books, and Take-Home Books. Also available are the Distar Library Series, the Distar Games, and Strategy Games to supplement the basic kits.

To achieve the best results from Distar Reading the authors give specific directions for teachers to follow during instruction. These

directions include: (a) have children sit in a quarter-circle in chairs (not at desks) in front of the teacher; (b) seat each child within reach of the teacher to avoid disruption of the group while managing a disruptive child; (c) have all materials ready; (d) place presentation book on table or hold it steady on lap; (e) remain within the specified time limit of 30 minutes; and (f) work quickly.

Immediate feedback is an essential aspect of Distar Reading. Correct responses are confirmed and incorrect responses are corrected at once. The teacher's response hand-signals are designed to make the reading tasks go smoothly. One such signal is pointing to the letters. The children sound-out the symbols as long as the teacher is pointing to the symbols. Teachers are instructed not to improvise the materials unless they have taught Distar Reading at least one year. They are not to present additional exercises or have children work in traditional readers or workbooks. Engelmann and Bruner (1969) feel that much learning can be undone when teachers present miscellaneous exercises that are not tied in with the program. However, other subjects may be taught during the day using conventional methods.

The lessons in Distar Reading I teach the child to decode words by learning sound-symbol relationships, sequencing, blending, and rhyming. Initially a child learns one sound for each of the 40 symbols. The symbols taught in Reading I include the lower case letters of the alphabet, certain joined letters that are sounded together such as "th", and the long vowels with diacritical markings. Silent letters appear in smaller print. Letters that are traditionally of similar shape such as "b" and "d" are modified to reduce recognition problems (see Appendix A).

One of the first steps in teaching Reading I is the teaching of the

Symbol-Action Games. After a child can correctly sequence actions presented by the teacher, he is taught to sequence sounds in a word.

During the Blending exercises the child "spells" the words orally by saying each sound slowly when the teacher points to the symbols. Then the child will say the word quickly and blend the sounds at a normal speaking rate.

To make the students aware of similarities and differences in words, they practice the Rhyming exercises. Engelmann and Bruner feel a child must learn to hear similar sounds in words before he can see a relationship in the printed symbols. The first step in teaching the Rhyming exercises is to get the child to say rhyming words by changing only the beginning sound. Bruner (1968) provides an example: sat, fat, mat, rat.

The Distar Reading program is not totally oral. The Take-Homes provide written practice to reinforce the daily skills and encourage the children to work independently. Because the Take-Homes are contingent upon correct responses, the authors believe students will work diligently to receive them. They are thought to be especially rewarding for disadvantaged children who may not have any books or printed material of their own.

Another important feature of Distar Reading is assessment. Initial testing is done to establish groups or assist in the placement of transfer students. The tests are criterion-referenced and students are placed in groups according to the skills they have mastered. Faster learners may skip up to 40 of the 160 lessons in Reading I if they have mastered the skills. Each area such as Blending or Rhyming will include tests that serve as a guide to student progress. If a child has not

mastered a skill, he will have trouble doing new tasks which require use of that skill. Failure on a test will result in repetition of the presentations specified on the test. Teachers must not help students on a test because the students would then be pushed to perform new tasks at which they cannot be successful.

The Distar Reading program has been strongly criticized by child-centered early childhood educators because it is fast-paced and seems to ignore children's feelings and interests (Moskovitz, 1968). Engelmann admits that Distar is not child-centered, but that it is a very successful method whereby a good teacher can help children be ready to compete in learning programs in which they otherwise could not compete. The authors call the program highly structured and intensive, and make no apologies; they believe that such fast-paced, directed programming is essential for early learning. Gearheart (1976) feels that Distar must be experienced to be understood and appreciated, and that it is sometimes "too much" for some teachers. He states that teachers who try Distar tend to feel strongly one way or the other as to its effectiveness as a total reading approach. Boyd (1975) reports that while some teachers reject the instructional rigidity of the program, others find it well-organized and highly effective in teaching children to read.

The purpose of this study was to confirm or reject earlier findings regarding teacher opinion of Distar Reading and add to the state of knowledge relating to the Distar Reading System.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Engelmann feels that the Distar Reading program enables children who have mental ages of four or above to learn to read. Engelmann refutes the traditional belief that a child must have a mental age of 6.6 years in order to read (Gillespie, 1974). Aukermann (1971) reports the Distar Reading system is based on the belief that children will learn the concepts and skills that they should know only if those concepts and/or skills are taught. The teacher must structure every moment with concentrated and exact teaching. Since the publication of Distar Reading in 1969 several studies have been conducted concerning pupil progress.

A follow-up study of twenty school districts which used Distar Reading demonstrated that the Distar system was effective in building basic skills and intelligence for a wide variety of disadvantaged and low IQ children (Kirk, 1973). The Distar Reading program was matched against a traditional Head Start program in Canton, Ohio in 1967. The Distar Reading group gained 126 points compared with a gain of 69.7 points by the Head Start group on the Pre-School Inventory Test (Aukermann, 1971). In Oakland, California, six kindergarten classes were used in a study during 1970-71. The two classes using Distar Reading showed significant gains in all areas of the Gates-MacGinitie Readiness Test over the other four kindergarten classes (Gordon, 1971). Summerall and Brannigan (1977) compared the effectiveness of Distar Reading (phonetic approach) and Johnny Right-to-Read (special alphabet approach) using second grade children with average intelligence who had scored low on the Stanford Achievement Test, and had performed poorly in reading during the first grade. They found that both groups made significant gains in word

and paragraph meaning, however the children using Distar Reading made much greater gains in comprehension scores. Becker and Engelmann noted favorable results in two separate studies in which disadvantaged children used Distar Reading. In the 1973 study, the average performance of low-income second graders at the end of the year was 3.7 on the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT). In the second study (1976), 8000 children who received Distar Reading instruction from kindergarten through third grade performed above or near to national norms on all measures of the WRAT at the end of third grade. These 8000 children were 1.75 standard deviations above the norm of the Reading (decoding skills) section of the WRAT. In 1975, Engelmann and Carnine evaluated second graders who had received two years of Distar Reading instruction. Their average total reading score was 4.7 on the Stanford Achievement Test. Questionnaire responses indicated that students liked Distar Reading, felt confident, and could read independently about some topics presented to them.

Other studies are available which deal with teacher presentation, or teacher and pupil opinions of the Distar Reading program. Kryzanowski (1976) reported that when teachers increased their praise rate during Distar Reading I instruction, on-task behavior of the pupils increased from about 50 to 80 percent. Similarly, Carnine (1976) found that on-task behavior increased from 30 to 90 percent when the teacher's questioning rate increased from four to twelve questions per minute. The rate of correct student responses increased from 30 to 80 percent when questions were more rapidly paced. Carnine feels that there is an optimum presentation rate that depends upon the difficulty level and the newness of the task. He does not state that faster presentation of

instruction is necessarily better. In two studies by Ogletree and Ogletree (1976, 1977) favorable responses were sounded from the majority of teachers surveyed concerning the structure, organization, and economy of teacher preparation time. However the teachers' responses concerning the effectiveness of Distar were not so favorable. Most felt that while Distar worked well for slow students, it did not meet the needs of average or above average students. Fifty-eight percent of these teachers felt that the 30 minute lesson time was insufficient. The majority of teachers stated that although the pupils liked Distar, their attention span did not increase as advertised. Ogletree and Ogletree (1977) also reported that 73% of the teachers did not want to use Distar Reading exclusively, but would use it in conjunction with other programs if given the option. DiPasalegne and Ogletree (1976) determined by a survey of 105 Chicago teachers that the majority had positive opinions of Distar. They felt it was effective for most, but not all children. The structure of Distar was seen as a good feature and 83% felt confident while teaching. Even though 83% taught Distar everyday, 56% modified some aspect; either format, signals, materials, or take-homes. Although these 105 teachers had favorable comments about Distar Reading, 57% stated they would not use it again.

This study, similar to the one used by DiPasalegne and Ogletree, surveyed teachers to gain insight into the effectiveness of the Distar Reading program as reported by teachers who had utilized it.

METHODS

A survey instrument was developed to address some of the major claims made in support of Distar Reading. In general the instrument included items asking if teachers liked Distar, if it was effective, how pupils reacted to it, if the teachers followed the format, and would the teachers use Distar Reading again. The survey consisted of 21 multiple choice items and space for additional comments. The first item of the survey asked respondents to state if they had ever used Distar Reading. If not, they were to return the survey without further responses. In this way a discrimination could be made between "returns" and those not using Distar Reading. If the respondents had ever used Distar Reading I, II, or III they were to complete the survey and return it in the pre-addressed and stamped envelopes.

The questionnaires were mailed to 116 special education teachers employed in public schools within an 80 mile radius of a major Texas university. Only those school districts were selected which had 3000 or fewer pupils enrolled.

Obtained data were analyzed using simple percentages to reflect the magnitude of teacher opinion to the items.

RESULTS

Of the 116 surveys sent, 93 (80%) were returned. Of those returned, 7 (7.5%) of the respondents had taught using Distar Reading I or II. The following results represent the views of those seven special education teachers that had actually used Distar Reading with at least one pupil. Some of the response percentages have been grouped for analysis purposes.

It was anticipated that Distar Reading would not work equally well for all children . The data collected supports this assumption in that 83% of the respondents stated that Distar did not work equally well for all of their pupils. Only 17% of the respondents felt that their slowest students improved at all, yet 57% indicated that most of their pupils were learning the Distar material. As expected, the teachers reported that the majority of children who used Distar Reading liked the program. The teachers followed some, but not all of the instructions as specified in the manual. Seventy-one percent did teach Distar regularly as prescribed, but 71% also made changes in the instruction or format. The majority of the respondents felt that the Distar approach was not a good way to teach, and would not use it again. The concept and percent of response agreement for each item are recorded in the table below.

Table 1. Percent of responses in agreement with each concept.

1. The children were learning Distar materials.	57%
2. Distar works equally well for all children.	27
3. Distar works better for slow students.	40
4. Slowest students improved.	17
5. Children liked Distar Reading.	71
6. Children were bored.	43
7. It was the same or less difficult to keep student attention.	57
8. Daily preparation was less than other lessons.	28
9. Distar was easier to use than other programs.	28
10. $\frac{1}{2}$ hour lesson was of reasonable length.	57
11. Distar was taught almost every day.	71
12. Teacher made change in instruction or format.	71
13. Take-Homes were effective rewards.	14
14. Tests were a good guide to pupil progress.	50
15. Teacher felt confident using Distar.	68
16. Teachers liked structure.	60
17. Distar taught what the teacher wanted to teach at least some of the time.	83
18. Distar is a good way to teach.	43
19. Teacher would teach Distar Reading again.	43

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Teacher opinions of the Distar Reading program, as tapped by the devised survey, disagree with much of the literature reviewed. For example Ogletree and Ogletree (1977) report that 58% of their respondents felt that 30 minutes of instruction was insufficient. Current results indicate that the majority of respondents (57%) believed 30 minutes of instruction was reasonable. Engelmann recommends Distar Reading for slow learners, including educable mentally retarded and learning disabled children. Kirk (1973) supports Engelmann's claim by reporting that Distar was effective with low IQ children. Ogletree and Ogletree (1976) also report that Distar was particularly effective for slow learners, but the current study indicates that 83% of the teachers surveyed disagreed: slowest students did not improve.

Ogletree and Ogletree (1977) hypothesized that their teachers favored Distar Reading because of the economy of preparation time required; however, the current study refutes that. Seventy-two percent of the teachers responded that Distar Reading required as much or more preparation time as traditional instruction.

Some of the teachers responding to this current survey agree with earlier results of studies on Distar Reading. Ogletree and Ogletree (1977) report that the majority of pupils liked Distar instruction. The respondents recently surveyed reported that a strong majority of children did seem to like and pay attention to reading lessons in the Distar program. Because of the structure of the Distar Reading program, 83% of the subjects in the study by DiPasalegne and Ogletree (1976) reported that they felt confident in using Distar Reading. The current study

supports this finding but at a lesser magnitude (68% confident; 60% liked structure).

One remarkable finding that appears in much of the more recent studies has strong implications in regards to future use of the Distar Reading System. Ogletree and Ogletree (1977) report that 73% of their respondents would use Distar Reading again only with modification; suggesting that they were displeased with the total program. In the current study, respondents were asked only if they would like to use Distar Reading again, but none of the options available to the respondents included "with modifications". Only 43% reported they would use it again. Perhaps this finding is in agreement with Ogletree and Ogletree: without modification, the Distar Reading program would not be used again.

Future research to determine what changes teachers recommend could prove beneficial to the publishers of the Distar Reading System. Other results of this study indicated that Distar has not been used by the majority of special education teachers in this area although they are aware of its existence, thus, determining precisely why Distar Reading is not used may also be subject to further investigation.

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APPENDIX A

Examples of Distar Reading

ōld

Task 20

- a. Read it. Point to **ō**, **l**, and **d**. Permit no pauses between sounds.
- b. When **ōōōllld** is firm, say: Say it fast! What word is this? Wait. Yes, **ōld**.

Task 21

- a. Read it. Point to **h**, **ō**, **l**, and **d**. Permit no pauses between sounds.
- b. When **hōōllld** is firm, say: Say it fast! What word is this? Wait. Yes, **hōld**.
 - To correct: It rhymes with **ōld**: **hōld**. Your turn. Repeat a.

cōld

Task 22

- a. Read it. Point to **c**, **ō**, **l**, and **d**. Permit no pauses between sounds.
- b. When **cōōllld** is firm, say: Say it fast! What word is this? Wait. Yes, **cōld**.

gōld

Task 23

- a. Read it. Point to **g**, **ō**, **l**, and **d**. Permit no pauses between sounds.
- b. When **gōōllld** is firm, say: Say it fast! What word is this? Wait. Yes, **gōld**.

Task 24

- a. Read the entire series to the children.
- b. Then say: Read it with me. Point as you read: **ōōōld**, **hōld**, **cōld**, **gōld**.
- c. Call on individual children to read each word. Point to each word and read it.

Emphasize the words in capital letters.

Task 20

a. Point to the word. I know this word: **eYe**. It's a funny word.

Watch me spell **eYe** by SOUNDS. Point as you say the sounds: **eeeYyeee**.
But we don't say **eeeYyeee**; we say **eYe**. What word is this? Wait.

b. Everybody, let's spell **eYe** by SOUNDS. Point as the children spell: **eeeYyeee**.

Call on several children individually. Ask: What word is this?

eye

Task 21

Do not point to the small letter.

a. Point to the word. I know this word: **picture**. It's a funny word.

Watch me spell **picture** by SOUNDS. Point as you say the sounds: **piiictüürrr**.
But we don't say **piiictüürrr**; we say **picture**. What word is this? Wait.

b. Everybody, let's spell **picture** by SOUNDS. Point as the children spell: **piiictüürrr**.

Call on several children individually. Ask: What word is this?

picture

Task 22

Do not point to the small letter when spelling by sounds.

a. Point to the word. Raise your hand if you know this word. Call on a child.

b. After he has identified the word, say: Everybody, let's spell this word by SOUNDS.

What are we going to spell this word by? Wait. Point to the sounds as the children spell: **sssquuuääärrr**.

- To correct: I can spell this word by SOUNDS. Watch. Point to and spell: **sssquuuääärrr**.

Then have the children spell by sounds with you.

c. Now let's spell this word by LETTER NAMES. What are you going to spell this word by? Wait.

Point to each letter as the children spell **square**.

- To correct: I can spell this word by LETTER NAMES. Watch. Point to and spell: **square**.

Then have the children spell by letter names with you.

square

Task 23

Call on individual children to read a word on this page. Point to the word.

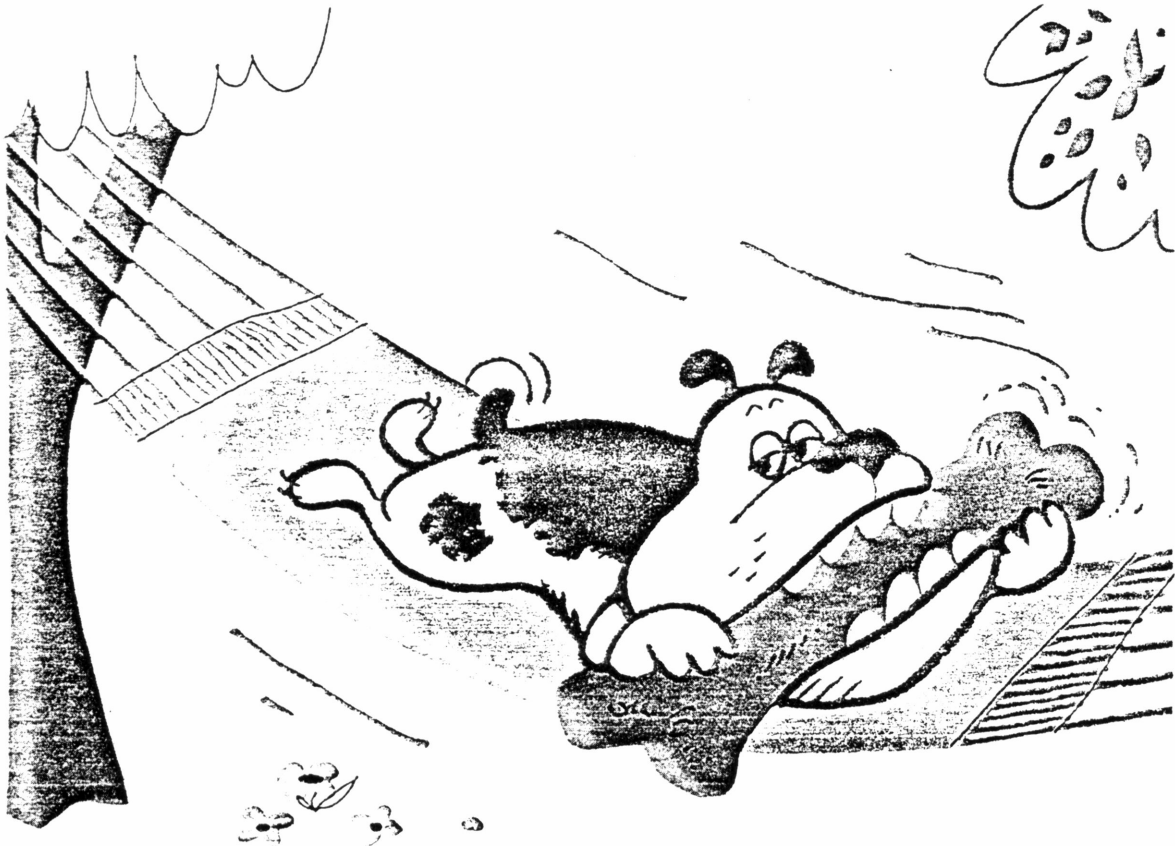
Now it's your turn. You point to the word and read it.

NOW GO TO THE DIRECTIONS FOR STORY 286.

→ sam

← this ■ is ■ not ■ mē. →

← this ■ is ■ sam. →



→ sam ■ is ■ mad.

pat said, "I am wet and sō
is the hat. I will get the hat
and gō to the farm."



pat got her hat and said, "I
hav_e som_e th_{ing} to ē_at and it
is not cō_rn. a fish is
in the hat."

the gōld fish

once there was a fisher man. this fisher man was not good at fishing. the other fisher men cāme back with lots of fish every dāy. but this fisher man did not comē back with many fish. on somē dāys this fisher man cāme back with nō fish at all.

the other fisher men had pretty hōmēs. this fisher man had an ōld hōmē that was not pretty. the other fisher men had cars. this fisher man did not havē a car. the other fisher men had lots of thīngs to ēat. this fisher man did not havē lots of thīngs to ēat.

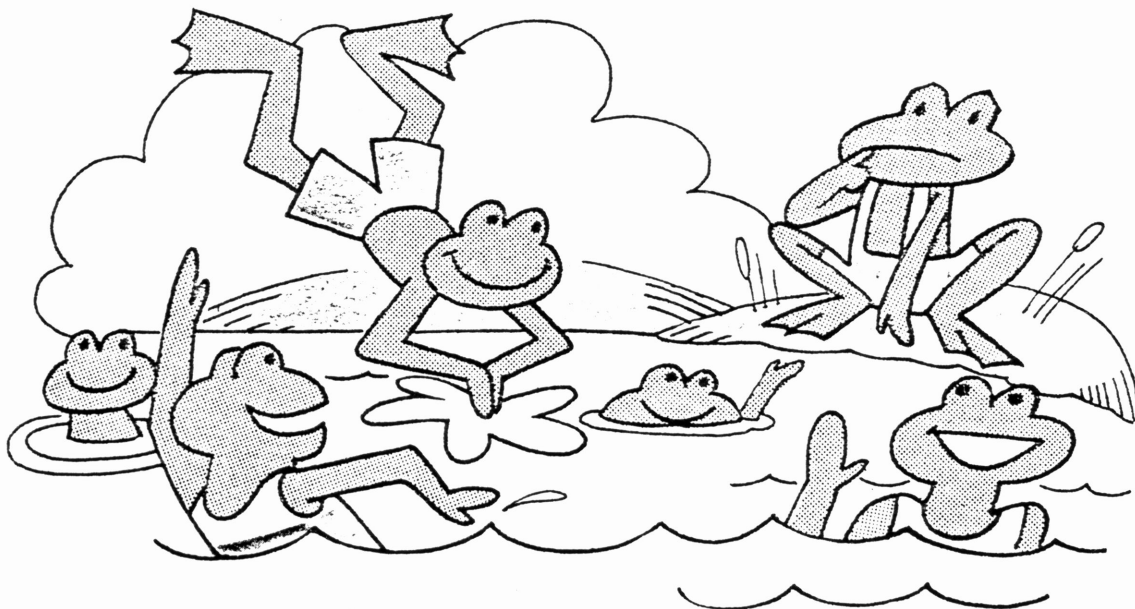


The Frog That Was Afraid to Swim

Pete was a little green frog. Pete lived on the shore of a pond. He lived with his brothers and sisters and mother and father.

Pete's brothers and sisters liked to jump into the pond and swim. They would say, "Weeee." And they would jump into the pond. They would swim down to the bottom of the pond. Then they would come up with only their eyes showing above the water.

Pete's brothers and sisters would yell from the pond, "Come on in, Pete." But Pete would not go into the pond. Pete was afraid to swim.



His mother would say, "Pete, you are a frog, and frogs love to swim." But Pete would say,

APPENDIX B
The Instrument

Dear Teacher,

My name is Linda Johnson, and I am an undergraduate student at Texas A & M. I am working on this survey as part of my course work needed for graduation. If you can provide me with any information, I would greatly appreciate it.

The survey concerns DISTAR Reading. If you have ever used one of these kits, please answer the items based upon your memory. If you have never taught children using DISTAR Reading, I would appreciate it if you would respond to item #1 only, and return the form to me.

Please circle the letter of your choice. If you feel an item needs more than one answer, circle the appropriate letters.

1. Have you taught using DISTAR Reading?
 - a. no (Stop, please return form to me. Simply fold and staple.)
 - b. yes (Please continue)

2. What level(s) of DISTAR Reading did you use?
 - a. I
 - b. II
 - c. III

3. Were the children learning the DISTAR material?
 - a. most were
 - b. most were not
 - c. a few were
 - d. a few were not

4. Did DISTAR work equally well for all children?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 - c. do not know

5. Did DISTAR work better for
 - a. slow learners
 - b. average learners

6. Did your slowest students improve?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 - c. do not know

7. Did the children like working with the system?
 - a. most
 - b. some
 - c. most did not

8. Were the children bored with the repetition of the lessons?
 - a. many were
 - b. few were
 - c. none were

9. How difficult was it to keep the student's attention?
 - a. more than other work
 - b. not more than other work
 - c. less than other work
10. How did your daily preparation time compare to other lessons?
 - a. more
 - b. less
 - c. same
11. Was DISTAR easy to use?
 - a. easy
 - b. average
 - c. difficult
12. Was the daily $\frac{1}{2}$ hour lesson
 - a. reasonable
 - b. too long
 - c. too short
13. Did you teach it every day?
 - a. almost always
 - b. irregularly
14. Did you change instruction or format?
 - a. always followed book
 - b. a few changes
 - c. many changes
15. Were the take-homes effective as rewards?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 - c. I changed them to make them more effective
 - d. did not use
16. Were the test results a good guide to student progress?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 - c. do not know
17. Did you feel confident using DISTAR?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
18. Did you like the structure?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
19. Did it teach what you wanted it to teach?
 - a. yes
 - b. no
 - c. sometimes

20. Do you think it is a good way to teach?
- a. yes
 - b. no
 - c. no opinion
21. Would you like to use DISTAR Reading again?
- a. yes
 - b. no
 - c. no opinion

If you have any further comments, please feel free to write them below. Thankyou very much for completing this survey.

Please note: fold the questionnaire, staple, and it is ready to mail.

COMMENTS: