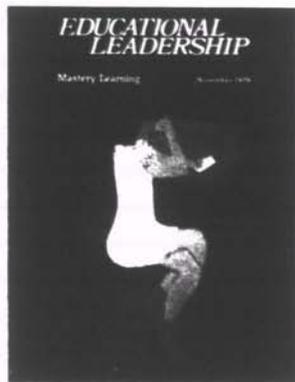


# Overview

Ron Brandt



The painting on this month's cover, *Girl Writing* by Milton Avery, is from *The Phillips Collection*, Washington, D.C.

The idea for this theme issue came from Michael Katims (page 118), a vigorously determined young man whose goal is for all of Chicago's students to read at grade level or above. He called me to argue with an article we had published<sup>1</sup> that questioned the use of mastery learning to teach reading. It can be done, he said, Chicago is doing it; and if I didn't believe it, I should come and see for myself.

A couple of months later, I did. Katims took me to schools where teachers and principals have a new enthusiasm. As we drove through streets clogged by snowdrifts and stranded cars, he talked confidently, exuberantly, about the curriculum materials he and his staff are preparing.

The person who crystallized the idea of learning for mastery was, of course, another Chicagoan, Benjamin Bloom (page 157). I talked with him in July in his office on the fourth floor of the School of Education on the University of Chicago campus. The massive stone building is not air-conditioned, so his windows were open to catch the morning breezes off Lake Michigan.

Bloom's office has only a few pieces of well-used wooden furniture, and books and papers are stacked about in functional disarray. On one wall hangs a photograph of Ralph Tyler—and a blackboard, useful for clarifying and explaining things. As he answered my questions, Bloom spoke slowly and deliberately, pausing now and then to find the words to express exactly what he meant.

These two men, the impatient engineer and the careful scholar, have different things to say about mastery learning—and both are worth listening to. Each of the other writers in this issue also has a special contribution to make. I won't mention them all, but James Block deserves recognition. For several years he has explained the theory, synthesized the research, and speculated about implications for society. This time (page 114) he summarizes the "state of the art."

Several of this month's authors tell about use of mastery learning in their school systems. The reports from Carol Barber in Denver (page 126), Joan Abrams in Red Bank, New Jersey (page 136), and Gene Geisert in New Orleans (page 128) are all decidedly upbeat.

Not everyone is convinced, of course. Educators committed to individual development have strong reservations about what they see as overemphasis on group-based instruction. Carl Glickman (page 100) and Lowell Horton (page 154)

criticize both the assumptions on which the approach is based and the way it works in practice.

Joan Hyman and Alan Cohen (page 104) summarize extensive research by saying it is no longer an issue whether Learning for Mastery works or not—it does—but they add that individualized programs are more effective than group ones when the technology is right.

Reasonable people may disagree over means, but teaching for mastery is more than a method; it's also a goal. Bloom says he doesn't intend to push a particular system so much as to get rid of the assumption that a third to a half of all students will do poorly. He wants "favorable learning conditions" that will enable more students to succeed.

Lorin Anderson (page 140) suggests that what we are talking about is "adaptive education." From this point of view, many of the innovations and reforms tried by, or forced on, schools in recent decades—reforms as disparate as desegregation, pass-fail grading, identification of learning styles, individual programs for the handicapped, and competency-based education—are related in a common purpose: making schools more effective for all students.

From this broader perspective, the question is not *whether* we should teach for mastery. The question is only—*how?*

<sup>1</sup>Thomas E. Barone. "Reading, Writing, and Mastery Learning: Are They Compatible?" *Educational Leadership* 36: 187-92; December 1978.

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