

Why Business Supports Mastery Learning

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Members of the business community will do their part to help spread the use of mastery learning and other promising approaches.

"When I finished the Mastery Learning Workshop in August 1978, I was not ready to believe that my new skills would help my poorer students to turn over a new leaf. Now, after one year's use of Bloom's mastery learning approach, I know for certain that almost all my students can be helped to learn all that I require for mastery."

Thus spoke a New York City sixth-grade social studies teacher as he helped Thomas Guskey train 29 teachers in the New York City Board of Education's 1979 summer Mastery Learning Workshop. Similar statements were made by junior high school English and math teachers, and by one teacher who successfully taught geometry to a group of high-school-age black youths who were two to five years behind in reading and arithmetic.

Slow Introduction

Classroom use of mastery learning has begun in several cities, but its introduction is occurring much more slowly than a study of its potential would suggest. There are many reasons for this. In addition to suffering from the predictable human resistance to new and different procedures, mastery learning lacks curriculum materials and formal preservice and inservice teacher training programs. Perhaps the greatest barrier, however, is that mastery learning principles seem to fly in the face of teacher experience and expectations. Even after hearing several examples of how teachers and students have been turned on by mastery learning classroom experiences, most newly-trained teachers remain ambivalent—they are hopeful, yet doubtful. For example, a high school algebra teacher, upon finishing the 1979 workshop, said, "When I started this mastery learning class, I was cynical. Now I am just skeptical. But I will give it a good try next year." Others in the class were somewhat more optimistic. All are committed to utilizing mastery learning next semester. The probable success of their students, added to scattered success stories from Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, and other public school districts, should help lay the foundation for

a more rapid spread of this valuable new classroom learning process.

Gap in Teacher Training

One reason why educators view mastery learning so skeptically is that nothing in their training or classroom experience has prepared them for the possibility that almost all students can be enabled to master a given subject in a reasonable length of time. This fact is dramatized by the following report to the 1979 workshop by a teacher trained in 1978: "You know, until last year I spent most classroom time with my 'good' students. My 'poor' students received less help because my experience had taught me that they couldn't learn well, even with extra help. Last year my classroom became a new world. You should have heard *all* of my sixth-grade students describe the morphology of short stories knowingly and with interest. They really mastered an understanding of story structure in terms of plot, setting, foreshadowing, characters, and climax. I know now that what I do in the classroom makes a real difference with regard to how much each student learns. Most importantly, all my students know that they have learned much more in a mastery learning class. In fact, they have petitioned the principal to provide mastery learning instruction in their forthcoming seventh-grade classes."

Show and Tell Approach

Efforts to speed the introduction of mastery learning principles and practices must recognize the need for a "show and tell" approach. Teachers do not expect a new teaching method to enable poor students to master a subject. Few teachers know from experience that all students can learn. Instead, most teachers (especially professors of education) are convinced that poor students never learn well. In spite of the excellent research of John Carroll and Benjamin Bloom and the clear explication of various mastery learning concepts by James Block, most educators do not understand the fundamental implications of slow (rather than "poor") and fast (rather than "good") learning. Only their own firsthand experience and that of their



colleagues will convince the first generation of teachers of the merits of mastery learning.

For the next few years, we in the business community will help spread the introduction of mastery learning. We should also emphasize that mastery learning is one of many pedagogic approaches that need spreading if tens of thousands of underachieving youths in America are to achieve more of their intellectual, social, and economic potential. Such youths must be helped to see themselves, and to be seen by others, as worthy of extra effort and support.

In New York City, collaboration between the Board of Education, the United Federation of Teachers, and the Economic Development Council made possible the 1978 and 1979 mastery learning workshops. This collaboration has been strengthened by recent joint studies spotlighting other classroom practices that help slow learners to learn more at greater speed. In addition, recent convincing results in America and in England from research on essential characteristics of successful urban public schools (reviewed in the October issue of *Educational Leadership*) point to other profitable routes to improving schools.

The demonstrable success of mastery learning classroom techniques provides a new level of confidence that many societal problems posed by underachieving, unemployable young people can be solved. It is no longer necessary to depend solely upon moral, political, social, and economic arguments to inspire collaborative efforts by all segments of society to upgrade the intellectual achievement of all youth. All students must be offered public educational programs equal to or better than those provided by mastery learning.



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