

them more directly. The purpose of the tutor is not to teach something different, but to ensure that each child has learned what the classroom teacher has taught. If a teacher teaches long "a" in the morning, the main task of the tutor is to be sure the students get long "a," so that tomorrow they are ready for the next lesson. That's clearly a mastery learning concept, but we do it daily and with a one-to-one tutor to make sure that the kids actually get it.

But as you say, it's in accord with the principles of mastery learning. I doubt that Benjamin Bloom and other advocates would quarrel with your design.

Yes, but another problem with some mastery programs is that they chop knowledge into little pieces, and that's unnecessary. What is critical about mastery learning or any other program is how it's done. Another good example is individualized instruction. Nobody would quarrel with giving kids instruction suited to their needs; but in the '60s and early '70s, when educators made individualized materials and had the kids work on them all by themselves, the effect on achievement was disastrous. The concept was correct, but the way in which it was operationalized was foolish, because while you were accomplishing one goal—adapting instruction to individual needs—you were interfering with other goals, such as providing students with explanations by quali-

Bloom's Learning for Mastery model may actually be too limited a response to student differences in learning rates.

fied teachers and motivating students to learn.

Some of the things that you say don't work have been advertised as based on research. How would you describe the state of educational research these days?

It's not at the stage I wish it were, but in the last 15 years educational research has come into its own. We have a lot of promising developments: for example, the process-product studies of effective teaching. I am encouraged by the emphasis on what's really going on in classrooms.

Response to Slavin: Mastery Learning Works

James Block

This year marks the 20th birthday of mastery learning. In schooling, concepts that last even a few years are powerful and rare. As such, it is not surprising that mastery should draw periodic potshots. Slavin's is but the most recent.

I am disturbed by Slavin's interpretation of the cumulative mastery learning research record. Mastery advocates (e.g., Guskey and Gates 1986, Guskey and Pigott 1988), as well as more neutral parties (Stallings and Stipek 1986, Walberg 1985), have repeatedly reported exactly what Slavin proposes—"experimental-control comparisons over realistic periods of time with suitable measures of effectiveness." The most recent review, in fact, involves some 83 quasi-longitudinal studies ranging from years to over a decade (see Block et al. 1988). These studies have concluded, almost without exception, that mastery works. The basic strategies move the student who achieves at the 50th percentile to somewhere between the 65th and the 86th percentiles; this movement occurs in ordinary elementary and secondary school subjects; and the change registers on well-known standardized tests (Block et al. 1988). Enhanced mastery learning approaches do even better (Spady and Jones 1985).

I am also saddened by the dampening effects that this interpretation may have on communication between mastery learning and "Success for All" practitioners. There is a striking resemblance between Slavin's agenda for improving schooling and mastery learning's (see Block et al. 1988, pp. 49-57). Slavin's interest in the development of component approaches to instruction parallels mastery's promotion of the development of functional ones. His interest in the prevention of student learning difficulties jibes with mastery's, too. His interest in advancing "cooperative" learning overlaps with mastery's interest in developing "self-determined" learners. Lastly, his interest in tutoring clearly correlates with mastery's interest in the development of talent.

So I hope Slavin will not dismiss these comments out-of-hand. They are meant to caution him, his followers, and fair-minded observers not to throw out the proverbial mastery learning baby with the bathwater. That baby is now a young adult. They are also meant to suggest to Slavin and his followers that collaboration rather than confrontation is now in order. There are good reasons for the vitality and longevity of the mastery concept. While Slavin waits three years for data on his ideas, we are willing to share our 20 years of experience now.

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