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RESEARCH REPORT

TEACHING ACADEMIC SKILLS BY DIRECT INSTRUCTIONAL
METHODS TO SCHOOL-AGED ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL
CHILDREN WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS (1), (2), (3).

A SUMMARY

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There are some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children who have learning problems. The final report of the ACER Literacy Numeracy study states that the average performance of Aboriginal children in Australia (including those attending Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory) was 15-25 percent below that of Australian students overall in relation to basic academic skills. (Bourke & Parkin, 1977). The specific identification of school-aged Aboriginal children with learning problems has received little attention in the past because emphasis has usually been placed on more global difficulties experienced by Aborigines, such as poor environmental backgrounds, economic hardships or broad cultural differences. (Edwards 1974; Harris, 1976; N.S.W. Teachers Federation, 1964).

The child who is expected to perform adequately in the wider Australian society needs to be taught the basic concepts and operations in arithmetic, language and reading. The poor school performance of the child with learning problems needs to be expressed in terms which the teacher has control over - the skills the child has failed to learn. This study was directed towards this notion to achieve the major aims of the research project: the identification of learning problems and the remediation of these problems. Commercially available intervention curricula (Distar) in arithmetic, language and

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 - (3) A detailed description of the procedures used and the analysis of results may be obtained by writing to the authors at the Special Education Centre, Macquarie University, North Ryde, 2113, N.S.W. Australia.

reading were used. The Distar programs use direct verbal instruction with highly structured and task-analysed concepts, combined with positive reinforcement, modelling and shaping techniques. These components have shown to be successful in the teaching of children with arithmetic, language and reading problems (Becker and Engelmann, 1973; Maggs, 1974; Moodie, 1973, Stallings, 1975).

One hundred and seven children (89 from La Perouse and 18 from Mogo Public Schools, New South Wales) were involved in the study. Sixty of the children were Aboriginal. The results of the six months of direct instruction (although the actual time was during a nine months calendar period) revealed that most children demonstrated superior learning outcomes than would normally be expected; in fact, these children were beginning to reduce the gap between academic skills performance deficits and chronological age. In the area of academic skill development Aboriginal children performed as well as non-Aboriginal children.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY:

1. A better than "normal" rate of academic skill development was maintained by most children during the period of instruction across reading and language tests.
2. The common statement that Aboriginal children are inferior learners was not supported by the study; in fact Aboriginal children achieved as well as non-Aboriginal children in the area of academic skills.
3. That intensive, highly structured programs with specific academic objectives produced the positive results.
4. The ease with which the teachers acquired the requisite instructive skills suggested that the "economics" of the study be not only in the instruction of children, but also in the instruction of our teachers.
5. The positive results in relation to learning outcomes of the children suggest that this program ought to be implemented in other school settings where children have learning problems.
6. Similar studies to this one in other parts of Australia and overseas have shown consistent positive results which have direct implications to Departments of Education. Such departments ought to initiate, implement, develop, support and evaluate the use of such a program in the school setting.

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