

Article Response

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Author for correspondence:

Jennifer Buckingham,

E-mail: jennifer.buckingham@multilit.com

Direct Instruction in very remote schools: a rejoinder to Guenther and Osborne (2020)

Jennifer Buckingham

MultiLit Pty Ltdm, Level 7, Building C, 11 Talavera Rd, Macquarie Park, NSW 2113, Australian

Abstract

In an article published in this journal, Guenther and Osborne (2020) use data from the reading test of the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) to evaluate the effectiveness of the Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools program in its first 3 years of implementation. However, their analysis has some serious flaws, including that the ‘post-intervention’ data were actually collected from the start of the implementation period. This calls their conclusions that the program was ineffective into question.

The Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools (FLRPS) program was announced by the Australian Government in 2014 for the implementation of Direct Instruction (DI) and Explicit Direct Instruction in 34 remote and very remote schools in Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory (Pyne, 2014). It was funded by the government on the basis of extensive research showing the effectiveness of DI in improving academic outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged and minority children in the United States of America (Hattie, 2009; Coughlin, 2011) as well as some preliminary research on DI in Cape York in Australia (Grossen, 2013; Hattie, n.d.). The FLRPS program was delivered by Good to Great Schools Australia with an initial implementation period of 3 years which was subsequently extended to 2019 (Tehan, 2018).

DI is a specific program of explicit instruction with a sequenced curriculum and scripted model for teaching (National Institute for Direct Instruction, 2015). It is sometimes referred to as ‘big D.I.’. The teaching model known as direct instruction, or ‘little d.i.’, is a general set of principles that can be applied to any lesson in any curriculum (Rosenshine, 2012). The FLRPS program used ‘big D.I.’.

Given the acute literacy teaching needs of indigenous children in remote and very remote schools, it is necessary to carefully evaluate the impacts of programs in these schools. The federal government commissioned the Centre for Program Evaluation (CPE) at Melbourne University to evaluate the FLRPS program during its implementation. Their final report states, with reference to the time frame, that ‘steady improvements in NAPLAN were observed, particularly for reading, writing and spelling’ (Dawson *et al.*, 2018, p. 94). Although statistically significant positive gains compared to control schools were not found across all NAPLAN domains, intervention schools had substantially stronger progress in writing and spelling, with high effect sizes for change from 2015 to 2017 for spelling and reading in the intervention schools. The evaluation also found that extenuating factors led to widely differing program impacts among the intervention schools, making it important to look beyond the averaged results to identify the school and community variables that were related to success.

An article published in the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* purports to challenge the findings of the CPE reports. The article by Guenther and Osborne (2020) uses NAPLAN reading data for 25 very remote schools in the FLRPS program using DI. They averaged scores across schools and across years to conclude that the program was not effective and that ‘the intervention has a potential to be associated with educational harm to at least some students’ (p. 6). NAPLAN spelling and writing scores were not included in their analysis.

The study has a number of important weaknesses and one critical flaw: the time period studied. The analysis compares the average NAPLAN reading scores for a ‘pre-intervention’ period (2012–2014) with the average NAPLAN reading scores for a ‘post-intervention’ period (2015–2017). The problem is apparent when you consider the project timeline—the ‘post-intervention’ period is not actually post-intervention.

The FLRPS program was announced in 2014 and the first full year of implementation was 2015; starting with 33 schools and increasing to 34 schools at the end of 2017. Therefore, the ‘post-intervention’ data in the Guenther and Osborne study were collected in the first year (in fact, the first 4 months for the 2015 data) and the two subsequent years of the intervention. When the final data set was collected in NAPLAN 2017, the initial program still had 6 months left to run.

A recently published meta-analysis of 328 studies finds that DI is an effective teaching program, and that its effectiveness is greater when children begin earlier and have longer exposure

to it (Stockard *et al.*, 2018). It is unrealistic and unreasonable to expect any instructional program or method to deliver a swift significant improvement in Year 3 or Year 5 NAPLAN scores in the first few months for children whose literacy levels are years below the expected benchmark for their age and stage of schooling.

Furthermore, while NAPLAN assessments are able to capture useful information for the majority of Australian children, they are not sensitive to changes in the foundational reading skills of children with very low levels of literacy. That is not their design or purpose (Assessment, Curriculum and Reporting Authority, 2016).

There is also the issue of the comparison group. Guenther and Osborne (2020) compare the 25 schools in the FLRPS program to 115–120 very remote primary schools with high indigenous populations, providing no other demographic or educational information about their comparability to the intervention schools. Remote indigenous schools are not all exactly the same. Importantly, FLRPS is not the only direct instruction-type program being used in very remote schools in Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory.

This means that a lack of significant growth in NAPLAN scores in the FLSRP program schools could conceivably be due to the inappropriate reporting period and/or the inability of NAPLAN to detect growth in the cohort's reading skills. The results also cannot be generalised to all direct instruction-type programs—the study does not consider the instruction being provided in the comparison schools. It would be a tragedy if this flawed research undermined the solid improvements in learning being achieved by direct instruction methods in other remote and very remote schools such as the Kimberley Schools Project (Kimberley Development Commission, 2020).

Guenther and Osborne (2020) also report attendance rates before and during the intervention, finding there was a greater decline in attendance in intervention schools than in comparison schools. The possible reasons for this difference in attendance patterns are not explored in the article, despite the authors' stated commitment to a 'post-positivist' approach to their study, which usually employs contextualised and qualitative information in the analysis of quantitative data.

The CPE reports, however, do provide extensive contextual information about the schools, students and communities involved. They give important detail about the range of outcomes in the FLRPS program, including some pockets of success where low literacy had been immutable for many years, and the factors associated with these outcomes. They noted that the data being analysed were collected at an early point in the implementation and were duly cautious in describing their positive findings where it was appropriate.

A more thorough critique and comparison of Guenther and Osborne (2020) with the CPE reports would reveal more deficiencies in the former. And it may be the case that 'big D.I.' was not the best choice of program for all schools, for a variety of reasons. These possibilities should be properly explored. Nonetheless, the basic fact that Guenther and Osborne's (2020) post-intervention data cannot in anyway be accurately described as such is sufficient to call their conclusions about the FLRPS program into question.

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Jennifer Buckingham is a senior research fellow and director of strategy at MultiLit. She is also the founder and director of the Five from Five reading project—a community education initiative that provides free resources for teachers and parents on reading and literacy.