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Sold a Story

Transcript

Season 2, Episode 6: Get Ready!

Baker Mitchell is an engineer. He loves science. He was hoping his children would too.

> **Baker Mitchell:** But they heartily disliked science, they didn't want to have anything to do with science.

He saw the kinds of assignments they were getting in school. Things like — name the 27 parts of a leaf. That seemed like a useless task to him. He wanted to know what else kids were learning. He reviewed some curriculum from major publishers.

> **Mitchell:** They didn't discuss any of the exciting careers of the scientists — Newton, Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler. And that convinced me that science curricula and better instruction was needed to interest these kids.

So he created some of his own lessons. This was more than 30 years ago. In Houston.

He asked around, to see if people knew of places where he could test his lessons.

> **Mitchell:** They suggested I try a school in North Houston called Wesley.

Wesley Elementary. Thaddeus Lott's school. The school you heard about in Episode 4.

> **Mitchell:** I went out there on my first day, didn't know quite what to expect.

Then he saw the students in action.

> **Mitchell:** The kids were studious and responsive.

And they were curious, eager to learn.

> **Mitchell:** Those kids could have done anything.

(Music)

Baker Mitchell had come to Wesley to teach science. He left wanting to know how the school taught everything else.

He spent the next several years studying what Thaddeus Lott was doing at Wesley. And learning about Direct Instruction. He'd never heard of it.

He read about where Direct Instruction came from. How it works.

And eventually, he decided he wanted to start his own school. A school dedicated to Direct Instruction.

I'm Emily Hanford, and this is Season 2 of *Sold a Story*, a podcast from APM Reports. We're at Episode 6.

There are about 100,000 public schools in the United States. Thousands of them have tried Zig Engelmann's Direct Instruction.

But it's estimated there are fewer than 200 currently using his programs schoolwide.

One of them is the school Baker Mitchell started 26 years ago.

That one school has become four. A group of charter schools in and around the city of Wilmington, North Carolina … named for Roger Bacon, the 13th century scholar who helped develop the scientific method.

I went to visit. To see what Direct Instruction looks like in a school today. And to hear from the teachers who teach it, the kids who learn from it and the parents who choose it.

(Music ends)

Teacher: Hi loves, come in, go to class, good morning ....

This is morning drop off. A routine that looks pretty much the same at every school I've ever visited.

Teacher: Good morning.

But the routines here are different when you get inside the classrooms.

Nikki Chaney: Get ready.
Kids: Tug.
Chaney: Yes, tug. What word? (Tapping) Get ready.
Kids: Teach.
Chaney: Yes, teach.

That was first grade reading.

It's the same routine in 6th grade history.

Teacher: So, who was the last Roman emperor in the west? Think. (Clap) Get ready?
Kids: Romulus Augustulus.
Teacher: Romulus Augustulus.

And in 7th grade Latin.

Teacher: Next word is habeo. What word? Get ready.
Kids: Habeo.
Teacher: Habeo means to have. Habeo means what? Get ready?
Kids: To have.

This structured routine is a hallmark of Direct Instruction.

The teacher asks a question ....

Chaney: What word?

There's a brief pause. So the kids can think.

Then the teacher gives a signal.

(Tap, tap, tap)

A tap or a snap or a finger in the air.

Chaney: Get ready.

And the kids respond in unison.

Kids: Teach.
Chaney: Yes, teach.

But it's not all call and response during a Direct Instruction lesson.

Chaney: All righty friends, take out your storybook and open it up to page 52 ….

The first graders read.

Boy: Bill went fishing.

The 6th graders think about the history they're learning.

Bob Wingett: So, why did the Vikings not share that story?
Boy: Because they were embarrassed they lost.

And there's art. And music.

(A few beats of B.B. King)

Teacher: You're listening to B.B. King right now playing his song Lucille.

But even in music, the teacher uses the same call and response routine.

Teacher: What song is it? Get ready.
Kids: Lucille.
Teacher: Lucille is not just the name of the song, it is also the name of ….

This routine can be kind of alarming when you first see it.

Shannon Boyle: I was like — "Oh, they've just created like a small military academy."

Shannon Boyle wasn't sure what she'd gotten herself into when she started teaching here. Others said the same thing.

Wingett: I was like, what is that?

Daryl LaFave: I remember it being very strange. But you know, once you pick it up, it's how instruction works.

Stephanie Ake: Yeah, you'll find yourself telling your husband — I need you to take out the trash. What are you doing? Get ready. (Tap)

Teachers say the routine makes sense when they learn the logic behind it.

Boyle: When you ask the whole class one question and get a response from every student, you realize that this is a way to informally assess students as you're teaching.

If a kid blurts out an incorrect answer, the teacher can correct it right away. So mistakes don't become habits.

And the teacher can see if there are kids who are hesitating or not answering at all.

Students also get individual turns.

Chaney: Individual turn …. (Tap) Braelyn?
Braelyn: Brush.
Chaney: Yes, brush. Individual turn ….

The teachers call on students instead of asking for volunteers.

Jessica Lopez: If a student is raising their hand, the rest of the class can tune out at that point.

Jessica Lopez is one of the deans. She says this cold calling is a way to keep kids on their toes. Keep them engaged.

And the constant back and forth prevents teachers from talking too much, from slipping into lecture mode.

Daryl LaFave, who teaches art and archery, says Direct Instruction is kind of like playing catch.

LaFave: I throw it, you throw it. We're going back and forth. You're getting a lot more repetitions.

A lot more repetitions.

(Music)

The repetition and the back and forth — it might look like mindless memorization.

But cognitive science shows that repeating something you just learned strengthens your ability to retrieve it again later.

It's not enough to listen to a teacher talk. You've got to throw the ball back.

And Baker Mitchell says there are some things kids should memorize. Like basic math facts.

Mitchell: If you're working a system of equations and you have to stop and count on your fingers what two plus three is, you're going to get so lost in the details, you're not going to be able to figure out what the overall problem is. You want to do: two plus three is five. Bang!

(Music ends)

What he's saying is supported by cognitive science. Our working memory is limited.

If you have to stop and figure out basic stuff, you have less capacity for harder stuff.

Teacher: Good job.
Kids: Three times six is 18. Six times three is 18.

I'm in a 4th grade math class now.

Kids: 18 divided by three is six. 18 divided by six is three.

This routine is not from one of Zig Engelmann's programs.

When a school is using the principles of direct instruction but not one of Zig's programs, that's generally referred to as “little” di.

When a school is using Zig's programs, it's “big” DI.

The Roger Bacon schools do both.

But it's “big” DI in the early grades for reading and language. Zig's programs, with those carefully worded scripts.

And those scripts are what a lot of teachers don't like about Direct Instruction. At least at first.

(Music)

The idea that everyone should be teaching the same way goes against what they think teaching is supposed to be. Crystal Payne teaches 8th grade math.

Crystal Payne: You're always told — you're going to do something different than what so and so might do.

That was the message she got in college. Teachers develop their own way of teaching.

And they create their own lessons.

And if you go into teaching thinking it's your job to create your own lessons, the very idea of a script can seem like an insult. Like a violation of professional autonomy.

Zig Engelmann's Direct Instruction requires rethinking what it means to be a teacher. Teachers do not design their own lessons. That job has already been done.

The teacher's job is to focus on the teaching.

(Music ends)

Direct Instruction isn't just a big change for teachers.

It's a big change for students.

Emily Hanford: OK, I'm going to turn this on ....

I interviewed three students in a conference room off the main office. They all transferred here from other schools.

London Wilkins: My name is London Wilkins and I'm in 8th grade. I like playing basketball. Fishing too.

London came to this school a year ago. He says it was weird at first.

Wilkins: But I kind of got used to it and I realized how much better it is than other schools.

I asked him what's different.

Wilkins: I don't know what the word is. It's like … stable, I think.

A 7th grader named Colt Wood said the same thing later in the same interview.

Colt Wood: I feel like it's kind of more stable.
Hanford: OK, so you're using the same word. Stable. So, you like that? It's like you like the structure of it — (Wood: Yes.) is that an appropriate word? Is that an appropriate word for you too?
Wilkins: That's what I was trying to say.
Hanford: Interesting. OK.

The structure is one of the things critics object to about Direct Instruction. They say it's stifling. That it can crush the love of learning.

But these boys like the structure.

And they like the teaching.

Wood: I feel like it's much more clear. They teach you more. And they have like different ways to explain stuff than the other school.

Jahmir Gordon: It's the teachers. Like they help me like understand what I was learning and stuff.

This is Jahmir Gordon. He's in 8th grade.

Gordon: And they hold you up to high standards at this school and at the other school, they didn't really hold you up to nothing.

Jahmir says this school is challenging. And he likes that.

Colt does too. He says his old school wasn't challenging enough.

> **Wood:** Like there, it just felt like some very simple stuff. And here it's just like more complex.

> **Awanna Evans-Moore:** If you're concerned about your children's academics, I would say this is the school your children needs to be at.

I also interviewed parents. This is London's mom. Her name is Awanna Evans-Moore.

> **Evans-Moore:** It's just been a whole 180 for him. He just does so much better here.

She thinks it's the structure that made the difference for her son. That's what she was seeking when she decided to send him here.

Ashley David was seeking the different way of teaching.

> **Ashley David:** What impressed my husband and I, it was the direct teaching model that this school followed.

Their daughter was at another school.

> **David:** It was a school in Wilmington that was more discovery based and inquiry based and the teacher walks around, and it's the students teaching the students.

Her two other kids were doing fine. But the middle daughter was not. She couldn't focus. Wasn't getting much out of it.

A colleague told Ashley about the Roger Bacon schools. She'd never heard of them.

> **David:** Having teachers at the front of the classroom and students sitting in the chairs and having the back-and-forth, throughout the day for every subject, was exactly what our child needed.

She uses the same metaphor you heard earlier.

> **David:** The back and the forth is like playing a game of catch. It's not 15 different hypothetical balls coming at you at one time. You have a direct answer for one question. That is something that she has mastered now, and she's participating every day.

Ashley says she might have considered Direct Instruction for her other kids too — if she'd known about it.

> **David:** I wish that someone had come to me when my children were younger and mentioned this as a possibility. It never came up.

One of the teachers I talked to at Roger Bacon wishes someone had told her about Direct Instruction earlier too.

Rachel Theriault had been teaching for almost a decade in a traditional public school.

> **Rachel Theriault:** I was a burnt-out public-school teacher in America.

She says lots of her students were struggling. And she was thinking about quitting teaching.

Then she got a job at Roger Bacon. She went to the staff training before the school year started. And it was taught using the techniques of direct instruction.

> **Theriault:** I was like — wow. This is amazing.

It was the call and response. The repetition.

Theriault: It kept us engaged. And I thought that was huge, cause usually staff days are boring.

Rachel is no longer thinking about quitting teaching.

(Music)

Theriault: This school and Direct Instruction saved me as a teacher and has brought back the passion and the love for teaching. Sometimes after a really good lesson, I stand there and I'm like — Wow, that was an amazing lesson. I'm so proud of my students and of me. And it felt so good as a teacher. And I've never felt like that anywhere else.

(Music ends)

A note: there has been controversy surrounding the Roger Bacon schools for reasons that have nothing to do with Direct Instruction — including a high-profile lawsuit about their dress code by the ACLU.

We visited the Roger Bacon schools because Direct Instruction has lasted for 26 years.

And most schools that try Direct Instruction don't stick with it.

Why don't they?

(Music)

That's coming up after a break.

(Music ends)

**

(Music)

Donna Dwiggins was teaching English in Micronesia when she first encountered Direct Instruction.

Donna Dwiggins: And it was like — Oh my God. All of a sudden, kids were learning. All of a sudden, you were teaching them the key to the language.

She was hooked. She went on to work with Zig Engelmann and Doug Carnine in Oregon.

And got a big assignment. Help bring Direct Instruction to the entire island of Guam.

Dwiggins: And I packed my bags and moved to Guam.

Guam is a territory of the United States. An island in the Pacific so small it has only one school system.

Donna moved there in the early 2000s because the island had gotten a big federal grant to improve its schools.

The need was enormous. About 65% of first graders were behind in reading. In 5th grade, it was close to 90%.

The school system was going to try Zig's Direct Instruction programs. There was a new superintendent who was on board.

Dwiggins: He 100% supported it, wanted it to work.

There were other people in the school system who were not so supportive. People opposed to Direct Instruction. And people opposed to the new superintendent.

But it wasn't Donna's job to worry about all that. Her job was to get Direct Instruction up and running in the schools.

Dwiggins: We tried to make this as painless as possible.

Not easy to do when you're bringing something that is both new and kind of strange into an existing school system.

Donna says most of the principals didn't know anything about Direct Instruction. Teachers didn't either.

Dwiggins: Some of them had problems with signaling and the pacing, and some of them just had problems with compliance. They just wouldn't do it. They wouldn't teach it unless you walked in there to observe them.

And no surprise — the scripts were a big sticking point. They usually are.

Dwiggins: And what I always try to explain to them is Richard Burton or Mel Gibson or anybody else that's ever done Shakespeare — they got a script. It's the way in which they present it. It's the way in which they allow their talents to shine through that makes them spectacular at doing Shakespeare.

Donna had a team of Direct Instruction coaches working with her in Guam. She says things were going pretty well in the schools.

But the political situation was getting worse.

(Music)

Guam's former representative in Congress wrote an op-ed calling Direct Instruction an approach that robs teachers of their autonomy. Members of the school board were speaking out against it too.

And less than three years after he'd been hired, the superintendent who was leading the Direct Instruction effort in Guam was fired.

There was lots of leadership turmoil. Three new superintendents and two interim superintendents over the next few years.

Eventually, the district told schools they could decide for themselves whether to keep using Direct Instruction.

Some did. But the island-wide effort was over.

And Donna Dwiggins, who had helped bring Direct Instruction to Guam, lost her job.

(Music ends)

We wanted to know more about why schools start Direct Instruction. And why they stop.

(Music)

We identified more than 100 schools and districts that have used Zig's Direct Instruction programs at some point since the 1960s.

We emailed. We called. Some people got back to us. Most didn't.

We looked at news articles, annual reports, old videos.

And here's what we learned.

Direct Instruction is often brought in because things aren't going well. Other attempts to turn things around haven't worked. Test scores aren't good. The political situation is often tense.

That is a tough place to begin.

And Direct Instruction can be hard for schools to pull off even under the best of circumstances.

It often requires schools to make big changes. They have to find time for kids who are behind to get more instruction. There are frequent tests to make sure kids are mastering the material. Schools often need new systems to keep track of it all.

(Music ends)

For the people in charge, the scale of the change can be overwhelming.

> **Hailey McCarthy:** Like, all this stuff. So I'm like, oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh. I don't know what I'm doing.

McCarthy was a brand-new principal when her district in Texas was starting Direct Instruction. She was struggling to figure it out.

> **McCarthy:** It is not that I'm resistant. It may come across that way. I legitimately have no idea what I'm doing.

She needed help. She eventually got it from the National Institute for Direct Instruction — an organization Zig set up to help schools use his programs.

It wasn't just the logistics that Hailey needed help with. She needed help understanding the logic behind Direct Instruction.

> **McCarthy:** Everything seems crazy until you hear the whole story.

She read books about Direct Instruction. Started to get it. And love it.

Now she's superintendent of a charter school network in Florida that recently started using Direct Instruction.

> **McCarthy:** The first year, right, I was like forcing it, right. I'm like forcing people to do it. And then at like the end of the first year, a couple people came to me — like, it's working. The kids can read. And I'm like, I love that. I love that for us. I love that for us. I love that for them.

She says making Direct Instruction work requires a big commitment to supporting teachers.

> **McCarthy:** The training that goes into it has to be really extensive. You have to be in field all the time. Like, we're in schools all day, every day.

But sometimes schools skimp on the training. Or they start out providing it. But over time, they cut back.

That's what happened in Gering, Nebraska.

NIFDI Promo Video: (Children's voices, singing) Children and teachers at Northfield Elementary in Gering, Nebraska celebrate their success in reading ....

This promotional video was made by the National Institute for Direct Instruction in 2007, a few years after the Gering schools started using Direct Instruction.

> **Andrea Boden:** It's hard work, day in and day out, keeping it going.

That was Andrea Boden who was the curriculum director.

We tracked her down because Gering is no longer using Direct Instruction.

> **Boden:** It just takes a lot of support and it takes a lot of observation.

The training and the coaching were there at first. And there was a big federal grant to help pay for it all.

But the grant ended. The district leaders who had brought in Direct Instruction started to retire and take other jobs.

And the support system that Gering had built around Direct Instruction started coming apart.

Jadie Beam: Some of our new teachers didn't have all the initial trainings that we did.

This is Jadie Beam — an instructional coach who was in Gering as things changed.

Beam: So they maybe would get like a one-day jumpstart at the beginning of the year, and they didn't have the side-by-side coaching like our teachers did five years before. So I just don't think the support was there.

Eventually, Gering gave up on Direct Instruction as the main way of teaching. It stuck around as an intervention program for kids who were struggling. But — like in Guam — the district-wide effort was over.

(Music)

There's someone else who has watched Direct Instruction come and go in lots of schools. Someone you heard earlier in this podcast.

Ramon Alvarez: I saw kids in kindergarten reading, like unbelievable. I said, that is exactly what I want for my school.

Ramon Alvarez. You met him in the episode about Wesley Elementary.

After Ramon brought Zig's Direct Instruction to his school in Houston, he went on to help about 20 more schools across the country use it in their classrooms.

He's seen how hard it can be to keep Direct Instruction going.

And there's another problem. Ramon says sometimes school districts move too fast when they first start using it.

Alvarez: The superintendents want to improve schools *now*.

District leaders are often under intense pressure to raise test scores.

Their jobs can be on the line.

Alvarez: And so what do they do? They come up with all kinds of gimmicks.

Things like test prep instead of teaching.

Ramon says the pressure to get quick results can make it hard for schools to stick with anything for very long.

(Music ends)

When a school gives up on Direct Instruction, there are usually some fierce advocates left behind.

One of those fierce advocates is Lori Agar. She spent her 44-year career chasing Direct Instruction.

She moved from Washington state to upstate New York. Then to Detroit. Then back to Washington again.

By the end of her career, she thought she'd finally found a school where Direct Instruction was safe.

Lori Agar: Everything was going great. Loved it. I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

She was at the school for 10 years.

And then …

(Music)

… the principal retired.

> **Agar:** The new principal comes in. And we were all trying to tell her — you know, look at all these awards we've gotten, look how great our kids are.

But the new principal brought in a new reading program. Lori tried it. She says her students were struggling.

By then she was 66 and she was done. She retired.

(Music)

It's kind of like Direct Instruction is a foreign object in the American education system. The system keeps rejecting it.

That may be why Direct Instruction seems to have a better chance of survival in charter schools — like the Roger Bacon schools in North Carolina. Charter schools are public schools created to operate outside the traditional system. To do things differently.

And that's what Donna Dwiggins decided she was going to do after she lost her job in Guam. She started a charter school.

> **Dwiggins:** I went with my own pickup truck around the island and picked up loads of books.

All those Direct Instruction books the district schools were no longer using. She took those books and started a school dedicated to Direct Instruction.

(Music ends)

Next time on *Sold a Story* ....

> **Cathy Watkins:** He looked at me and said, I would rather a child never learn to read than learn to read like that.

We examine the deep disdain for Direct Instruction. Why do so many of us not like it?

And we hear from Zig at the end of his life.

That's coming up on Episode 7.

(Music)

I hope you'll check out our website, soldastory.org. We have much more there about this podcast. Articles, videos. Our contact information. A link to donate if you want to support our reporting. We even have *Sold a Story* mugs, stickers and tote bags.

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