

Explicit teaching

Explicit teaching is a highly structured, evidence-based instructional approach that involves clear, direct teaching of specific skills or concepts, typically broken into small steps, modelled by the teacher, practiced with guidance, and eventually applied independently by the student. This method is especially crucial in special education settings—such as Queensland special schools—where many students experience cognitive, communication, or behavioural challenges that impact their learning.

Definition of Explicit Teaching

According to Archer and Hughes (2011), explicit teaching involves the following core features:

- **Clear Learning Intentions**
Teachers explain exactly what students are learning and why.
- **Modelling (I Do)**
Teachers demonstrate the skill or concept while thinking aloud.
- **Guided Practice (We Do)**
Students attempt the task with support and feedback.
- **Independent Practice (You Do)**
Students complete the task independently, demonstrating mastery.
- **Frequent Feedback and Checks for Understanding**
Ongoing assessment ensures students are on track and misconceptions are corrected early.

Reference: Archer, A. L., & Hughes, C. A. (2011). *Explicit instruction: Effective and efficient teaching*. Guilford Press.

Why Explicit Teaching Is Crucial in Special Schools

In special education, many students:

- Have intellectual disability and require concepts broken down into manageable steps.
- Experience working memory and attention difficulties, benefiting from repeated modelling.
- Need scaffolded language and visual supports to access content.
- Require systematic skill development—not just exposure or immersion.

Explicit instruction supports all these needs by providing:

- Predictability
- Reduced cognitive load
- Opportunities for success and confidence-building
- Evidence-based strategy for mastering literacy, numeracy, communication, and behaviour

Examples Across the Prep–Year 12 Continuum in a Queensland Special School

Age/Level	Example of Explicit Teaching	Curriculum Focus
Prep	A teacher models how to follow a visual schedule, then assists students to follow it with gestures and prompts.	Personal and Social Capability; GIL
Year 3	During literacy, the teacher explicitly teaches how to identify the first sound in a word, using clear articulation, visual phoneme cards, and hand signs.	English (ACARA v9)
Year 6	In HASS, the teacher explains the concept of “past” and “present” using photos, timelines, and gesture cues. Guided practice includes matching pictures to the correct time period.	HASS and Thinking Capability
Year 9	In a cooking unit, the teacher demonstrates how to read a visual recipe, then leads students step-by-step through following instructions with embedded safety routines.	GIL + HPE + Literacy
Year 12	The teacher explicitly teaches how to complete a job task checklist for setting up a worksite table, first by modelling, then through guided peer practice.	Work Readiness (QCIA), Life Skills, Mathematics

Research Support

1. Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction (2012)

Rosenshine's widely cited research highlights how daily review, small steps, guided practice, and scaffolds improve student learning. These principles align with explicit instruction.

Reference: Rosenshine, B. (2012). Principles of Instruction: Research-based strategies that all teachers should know. *American Educator*, 36(1), 12–19.

2. Hattie's Meta-Analysis (2009; 2023 update)

Hattie ranks explicit teaching among the most effective influences on student achievement with an effect size of 0.63—well above the 0.4 “hinge point” for meaningful educational gain.

Reference: Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible Learning*. Routledge.

3. Vaughn, Hughes & Schumm (2000)

Found that explicit instruction significantly benefits students with learning disabilities, particularly when content is clearly segmented and reinforced over time.

Reference: Vaughn, S., Hughes, M. T., & Schumm, J. S. (2000). Teaching exceptional, diverse, and at-risk students in the general education classroom. Allyn & Bacon.

Rosenshine's 10 Principles of Instruction

Barak Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction are a set of empirically-based teaching practices derived from cognitive science, classroom observation, and research into effective teacher behaviours. These principles provide a practical framework for effective, structured teaching—highly applicable to both mainstream and special education settings.

Here are the **10 key features**:

1. Begin the lesson with a short review of previous learning

- Reinforces retention and activates prior knowledge.
- Helps students connect new content with what they already know.
- **Example**: Quick quiz, oral recap, or revisiting yesterday's work.

2. Present new material in small steps

- Reduces cognitive load and supports students with processing difficulties.
- Each step builds incrementally toward complex understanding.
- **Example**: Teaching one math operation before combining it with others.

3. Ask a large number of questions and check for understanding

- Encourages active engagement and ensures students are following.
- Questions help uncover misconceptions early.
- **Example**: Cold calling, turn-and-talk, visual check-ins (e.g., thumbs up).

4. Provide models

- Teacher demonstrates the task or concept, often using “think aloud.”
- Clear examples reduce ambiguity and set expectations.
- **Example**: Modelling a reading strategy like chunking or summarising.

5. Guide student practice

- Students practise new skills with teacher support and feedback.
- Prevents errors from becoming embedded.
- **Example**: Group task using a checklist while the teacher circulates.

6. Check for student understanding frequently

- Ongoing formative assessment drives real-time adjustments.
- Informs whether the class is ready to move on or needs more support.
- **Example**: Mini whiteboards, multiple-choice vote, visual signal cards.

7. Obtain a high success rate

- Aim for around 80% success in practice—high enough to show mastery but still challenging.
- Builds student confidence and reinforces correct learning.
- **Example:** Task differentiation to ensure all students achieve some success.

8. Provide scaffolds for difficult tasks

- Supports (e.g., prompts, visuals, cues) help students perform more complex tasks.
- Scaffolds are gradually faded to promote independence.
- **Example:** Sentence starters in writing, visual sequence cards in science.

9. Require and monitor independent practice

- After guided practice, students should attempt the task alone.
- Consolidates learning and ensures long-term retention.
- **Example:** Completing a task without prompts, with observational assessment.

10. Engage students in weekly and monthly review

- Regular revision combats forgetting and strengthens memory.
- Builds fluency and automaticity.
- **Example:** Retrieval tasks, concept maps, spaced quizzes

Summary Table

Principle	Purpose
1. Review	Strengthens recall, links new to known
2. Small steps	Reduces overload, ensures clarity
3. Questions	Promotes engagement and checks understanding
4. Models	Provides clarity and examples
5. Guided practice	Prevents errors and builds success
6. Check understanding	Drives instructional decisions
7. High success rate	Builds confidence and mastery
8. Scaffolds	Supports learners through challenges
9. Independent practice	Ensures retention and transfer
10. Review	Reinforces long-term memory

These principles are highly compatible with **explicit instruction**, and they work exceptionally well for students with disability when paired with **visual supports**, **multi-sensory learning**, and **structured routines**.



John Hattie's 2023 meta-analysis builds on over two decades of educational research into what works best to improve student achievement. His approach, known as Visible Learning, synthesises over 2,100 meta-analyses, covering over 400 million students globally, to determine the effect sizes of various teaching strategies. The effect size is a statistical measure used to compare the influence of different strategies. In Hattie's model:

An effect size of 0.4 is the "hinge point"—the average impact of all influences on learning.

Strategies with an effect size above 0.4 are considered more effective than typical.

Effect size > 0.6 represents strong positive impact.