

# Cracking the Code

*Some caring educators are bringing systematic, synthetic phonics to their students.*

By Jo-Anne Gross

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The prestigious US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development has spent a half a billion dollars on research into teaching reading. It reports that the best way to teach children how to read is with multi-sensory, systematic, explicit, synthetic phonics.

Their research, along with the research of many other respected research institutions in the United States and abroad, has completely discredited the whole language/balanced literacy approach to teaching reading.

We know now that reading is a brain-based activity. There are about 44 speech sounds and approximately 90 ways of writing them. For example, the sound /or/ has five grapheme (letter or letter combinations) representations: /or/, /our/, /ore/, /oar/, and /oor/.

Students need to learn to read and spell at the same time. Learning to read this way promotes reading fluency, permits good spelling, and enhances comprehension (provided, of course, that the students understand the meaning of the words they read).

Yet in Canada, most schools are now planning for the 2006/07 school year with no strategies that are linked to this research.

It has become clear that much of this problem is directly linked to the faculties of education that churn out teachers who have either received no training in teaching reading, or else have received training that is not based on research.

In my capacity as president of a reading remediation service in Toronto, I have met recently-graduated teachers who do not know anything about linguistics — short vowels, consonant digraphs, diphthongs, phonemes, phonological awareness, blending, segmenting, fluency, etc.

This is the language of teaching reading. Yet all of these terms, and the associated deep understanding of the mechanics of reading, totally eluded these teachers. Some of them had master's degrees!

Imagine the frustration of these teachers, altruistic by nature, when they grasp the inadequacy of their training. Having devoted at least a year and thousands of dollars to their education, they now realize that they lack the tools to teach young children to read and to help older children.

The U.S. National Reading Panel has confirmed that literacy is achieved by teaching phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Nevertheless, Canadian school boards are still making massive purchases of literacy materials that are not based on science.

The result is catastrophic literacy results and a 25-30% drop-out rate. Hardest hit are disadvantaged students and boys. Of course, these students' problems ultimately rebound back onto Canadian society, since much of the violence in neighbourhoods with low socio-economic profiles has academic failure at its roots.

When I developed the Remediation Plus System (RPS) during the clinical period from 1999 to 2003, I thought I needed to develop a program for teachers of students with language-based learning disabilities/dyslexia.

I soon found out that many students who came to my clinic appeared to be dyslexic but were not. They were students who simply had never been taught to read and spell!

For some time, I have been working to bring RPS to students in public schools, and I am pleased to have some success stories to report. I have come into contact with extremely caring educators, and there have been a few incredible breakthroughs.

- The District School Board of Niagara has 37 RPS-trained teachers now. By September, they will have 68, and as of 2007 they plan to have 102. This board is also beginning early intervention.
- The Waterloo Catholic School Board has embraced RPS in its special education division. They have started early intervention.

- The Northwest Catholic School Board watched a nearby First Nations school adopt the program preventatively and remedially. Northwest then authorized full implementation beginning in the fall of 2006, starting the work in SK and completing the RPS curriculum in grade 3. Special education will of course deliver the program for students with complex language-processing issues.
- The St. Paul Education Regional Division in Alberta, which trained 17 RPS teachers last fall, noticed that their grade 3 students who had been struggling with reading needed only 12-16 weeks of RPS to reach grade level. This board now wants to start systematic phonics in SK, and we will begin the training of 32 SK and grade 1 teachers this spring, over and above their special education division.
- A brave superintendent in a large Toronto-area school board recently championed a pilot in special education.

You may ask why I regard these educators as unusually brave and caring. It is because it takes courage to confront the Reading Wars head on and admit that what they are currently doing is not working. These educators are putting students first.

The Remediation Plus System is very supportive of the teacher. The lessons are completely scripted and systematic. Its completed lesson plans, 85 systematic, sequential, synthetic phonics sessions that also include lessons on rules and syllable instruction, guide teachers into teaching reading the right way.

All my knowledge, understanding and empathy I have learned as a parent, a student of reading research, and an educator.

*(Ms Gross is the developer and president of [Remediation Plus Systems](#).)*