

Creating an Activist

Why I joined OQE

By Nancy Wagner

When my youngest child started school, I expected that his experience would mirror the experiences of his older brother and sister. Both had adjusted to school routines and were doing well. Matthew had entered grade 1 already starting to read. Amy was well on her way by the end of grade 1.

James, however, was another story.

In kindergarten, he showed little interest in the reading area and always chose to spend his time in the more hands-on activity centres where physical activity was high. His teacher did point this out to me but did not re-direct him with any success.

By grade 1, I was starting to become concerned that James was not picking up any reading skills as yet. I conveyed my concerns to his teacher who immediately warned that I was unfairly comparing my youngest to his older siblings. “All children learn at their own pace”, I was told repeatedly. While conceding that this might be true, I still asked the teacher if he shouldn’t be picking up *some* words.

I was then instructed to surround my child with books and to read to him at every opportunity in order to foster a love of reading. This was certainly no problem. Matthew and Amy, then in grades 3 and 2, were voracious readers. Our house was full of books. James had the advantage of not only being read to by his parents every day, but also having stories read to him by his brother and sister.

James loved being read to. Problem was, he still couldn’t read at all on his own. His ability to identify even the simplest words out of the context of a story he had already memorized was not getting any better.

Throughout my child’s grade 1 year, I kept asking his teacher for assistance in teaching him to read. I requested teaching materials that I could use at home — simple readers that would allow my son to build his reading skills from the bottom up. Over and over, I was told that I was putting too much emphasis on reading ability. Finally, I gave up and backed off. I wasn’t getting anywhere anyway.

Two days before the end of the school year, I went to my son’s classroom to pick up his report card (we were heading for Prince Edward Island). The teacher informed me that the card was being mailed. Then, she pulled me aside and said that James’ report card might say “placed

in” grade 2, rather than “promoted to” grade 2. After all, she informed me, James was having trouble reading.

I haven’t often been rendered speechless in my lifetime, but this was one of those moments. We were then given a handful of storybooks to read to him over the summer. Not until I arrived home did I realize that James already owned most of them.

Due to boundary changes, James started grade 2 at a different school. Here was a chance to get off on a better footing. After the first day of class, I spoke to his new teacher and voiced my concerns about James’ inability to read.

I told the teacher that I wanted to get on the problem right away and would be willing to help in any way she saw fit. This time, I was listened to and not admonished about worrying unnecessarily. She thanked me for bringing the matter to her attention so promptly.

Later that fall, I happened to stop in at my son’s class to deliver a forgotten lunch bag. To my surprise, James wasn’t in class. He was in the library, I was told, receiving “enrichment”.

Thank goodness, I thought, as I left the school; finally James is getting help with his reading problem. Then it hit me: enrichment, not remediation. I headed back to talk to the teacher.

It turned out that James was doing so well in arithmetic that twice a week he was pulled out for math enrichment. But he was not receiving any help in reading. In fact, he was actually missing language arts when he went out for math enrichment.

Despite my evident exasperation, the teacher told me that my son would learn to read in due course but that right now he needed to be challenged in arithmetic.

James spent a month after grade 2 attending summer school (for reading, of course). A complete and utter waste of time, it was little more than babysitting.

Grade 3 was a disaster. Most schools have a teacher your child would do well to bypass. Well, we ran full tilt into the arms of Mrs. X, a teacher who had, to quote another teacher, been “cruising to retirement ever since leaving teachers’ college”.

Attempts for reading help with this teacher were frustrating. My husband and I, however, eventually convinced her to send home a communications book, which listed exercises for us to go over with our child. Each morning, the book would be returned with the exercises completed.

After two weeks, the book came home for the last time. In red pen, in a message to James that he was incapable of reading, this teacher wrote that, although he had “tried”, there did not seem to be any improvement and so the extra work was being discontinued.

My husband made an appointment to see this teacher (I couldn't be trusted to keep my temper). Mrs. X was unable to offer any strategy to help our son. The best she could do was to explain that James was one of many children still unable to read.

At this point, we asked for help from special education. Remember, my son's inability to read was still considered to be within normal parameters. The special education teacher was a lovely young woman who obviously wanted to help. She arrived at our meeting with an armload of resource materials and photocopies of research on reading instruction.

She took the time to explain the current theories around reading instruction and tried to teach me how to teach James. The method she recommended was whole language (parents today would be more familiar with its ugly offspring “balanced literacy”).

The important thing, I was told, was not to break the flow of the story when the child happened upon an unfamiliar word. Rather, look to the pictures for contextual clues and keep going. A word such as “teapot” could be substituted for the unknown word. I looked at this earnest young woman and told her that my son would read every word in every story as “teapot, teapot, teapot...”

This was the last time I attempted to get help from the publicly-funded system. My son was now at the end of grade 3. He could not read simple words, such as “it”, “the”, “cat” or “dog” consistently.

On the advice of friends who were teachers themselves, I began to look outside the system. I enrolled my son in an independent school in July. There, he began reading instruction using phonics. By the end of the summer, I was so impressed with his progress that I continued to pay for private lessons with the same teacher. After a year of private tutoring, he was well on his way.

About this time, I read an article about Malkin Dare. At the time, Malkin was the head of a Waterloo group called “Parents for Learning”, an organization that was dedicated to improving education in publicly-funded schools.

I soon learned that my story was far from exceptional. Every single parent at the first meeting I attended had joined the group for reasons similar to mine. Each parent had run into unnecessary

roadblocks thrown up by a system unwilling or unable to deal with a parent or child with a problem. Usually, the problem was a child's inability to read. Usually, the child was male.

That was 13 years ago. This year James graduated from Conestoga College. He wants to become a police officer. Although his reading skills are perfectly adequate, he still seldom reads for pleasure.

I wish I had known then what I know now. I would have got my hands on Malkin's new remedial reading program, *Stairway to Reading*, and worked with James myself, bypassing his school's reading program entirely.

I have often wondered where my son would be today if I had been unable to afford that private summer school and the private tutoring.

Lower-income families are often unable to pay for expensive extra help. Shouldn't our schools be willing to look at teaching methodologies that don't depend so heavily on help from parents? Shouldn't all parents have the right to send their children to schools where they will learn to read? Shouldn't society's most vulnerable citizens have access to the same high standards and bright future as the more privileged?