

Why Alex Can't Write

The International Perspective

by Natalie Kramer

I am a naturalized American. I immigrated with my family from Russia in the late seventies at the age of 17 having just graduated from high school in Leningrad where we studied (no options given) advanced calculus and trigonometry along with physics, chemistry, geography, biology, liberal arts and social sciences.

Almost as soon as I came to Washington, I heard from recent immigrants that the schools are "a problem" in this land of opportunity. I heard stories about Jewish parents enrolling their children in Catholic schools because math instruction was "a little better" there, parents tutoring their children because the school was hopeless and one couple even camping out at night with their raskladushki (Russian for fold-out beds) so that they could enroll their children in an alternative public school.

When the time came for my son Alex to start kindergarten, I enrolled him at the French school in a Washington suburb. Alex spent his kindergarten year learning French in a special class for non-native speakers, along with the basics of letter formation and a whole slew of social, academic and motor skills. I was pleased with how well the program was structured, how precisely it was carried out, how the teacher always seemed to have mastered the methodology and the sequence of instruction. In the first grade, the instruction in reading and writing in French began. Alex, 13 months after having uttered his first word in French, found himself in the top reading group. By the end of the year, the children could read short books independently, spell many commonly-used words and write short sentences correctly with proper capitalization and punctuation.

Things did not go as smoothly when Alex entered second grade and the instruction in written English began. There was no instruction in writing the way I knew it. No drills or practice

in spelling. No textbooks or workbooks. Arts and crafts were commonplace in the English class-room; birthday celebrations with cookies and juice took place during class time. At the same time, the children came home with writing assignments that they were expected to complete independently. Alex would come to me with a blank page and ask me to write the essays and the book reports because he had no idea where to begin. Being a firm believer in a child's responsibility to complete homework independently, I first tried to tell Alex to do his assignments on his own, but all he did was sit over a blank page dousing it heavily in tears. He didn't know how to spell most of the words he wanted to use or how to build a sentence. Alex soon developed an aversion to writing in English which he has yet to overcome at age ten.

After years of child-centred instruction in English, the children have a very inadequate grasp of basic grammar and spelling. Many of them refuse to have English-speaking pen-pals because they sense how weak their writing is in comparison with their writing in French. Some have been known to declare to their parents that they are "useless" when it comes to writing in English.

What is very frustrating is that for every criticism coming from a parent, there are a number of elaborately-crafted excuses from the teachers for why the children can't write. English is the second language at the school...All children learn differently...They have only four hours to study English...The classes are too large...The truth is that the children often are not instructed in the crucial areas of writing and, when they are, the methods are ineffective. As soon as I began tutoring Alex at home, things fell "miraculously" into place.

In my child's French program, the students are given a rigorous course of well-sequenced instruction with high expectations of performance. These expectations are derived from centuries of observation of how children learn and precisely at what age they can be expected to attain the various levels of skill. The methodology that helps children meet these expectations has also emerged through centuries of fine-tuning and careful experimentation and research. The results are impressive. At age ten, my child can write and spell in French better than most of my American-born colleagues with masters degrees can in English. In history, geography and science he has studied things that most American children don't learn until high school, if then.

Project Follow-Through reaffirmed the value of direct instruction. It is an amazing irony to me that teachers and researchers need to defend the merits of instruction with good materials, proper teacher training and sequencing of curricular content. Direct instruction has been the only way children have been instructed for centuries all over the world. If you approached a French (or a Russian or most other) teacher and told him or her to teach without a textbook or lesson plans, he or she would likely think you were ill.

Direct instruction is, to us, merely professional teaching; we simply do not consider anything else to be instruction. It wouldn't occur to anyone to bring a child to a pediatrician for indirect medical attention; why would anyone want indirect instruction? How did such a simple idea get lost? Why are we falling for unproved, harmful fads while ignoring the overwhelming evidence that "old-fashioned" instruction is effective?

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