

Behind Closed Minds

Children are dying on the vine, but these educators will not change their approach.

By Grant Mohr

In December two years ago, my son asked me to write a Santa note for him that brought tears to my eyes.

Santa, I want to know how to read so I can catch up.

This was a seven-year-old's desperate plea for help to a character he knew was mythical. We knew, and he knew, that his teachers were on the wrong track and that the school's much-vaunted Reading Recovery (RR) program was not making the slightest dent in his reading problems.

As informed parents, we knew RR was the only program in the division's arsenal and that our son was basically being written off. We therefore began to look for alternatives. Through a friend, we heard of the Reading Foundation, a well-respected reading clinic in Calgary.

From a call to them, I learned that they used the PhonoGraphix (PGX) reading program. Through an Internet search, I found PGX described among other programs in Diane McGuinness' *Why Our Children Can't Read*, a book I recommend highly. After reading this book, I realized that PGX is a paradigm shift in how reading should be taught.

PGX is neither sight word/whole language nor traditional phonics. Phonics, with its letter-name-to-sound approach is backwards to the way our written language was developed and requires the use of complicated phonics rules. PGX, on the other hand, uses a reverse approach [sound-to-letter(s)] to teach the code — without any phonics rules.

Convinced that PGX was our best shot, we bought the parent instruction book (*Reading Reflex*, 1998, by Carmen and Geoff McGuinness). As soon as we started to use the program with our son, we saw progress. In no time, our son was beginning to understand the use of the alphabet code. It was clear that he could have been doing this in kindergarten.

Buoyed by our success, we went to his school with a simple message: What you have been doing so far hasn't worked. You need to try something completely different. Here is a program that appears to work — so let's all get on board and implement it.

We were very naïve. The school personnel gave us the brush off and carried on exactly as they had before. We had no alternative but to remove our son from RR.

After five months of home instruction, our son moved from a pre-primer reading level to a beginning grade 2 level.

Aware that we had a good news story on our hands, we asked his teachers to permit us to share our "secrets" with the other teachers at the school. They balked at the idea but did suggest I take it up with the school board.

In September 1999, we moved our son to a private school that uses a reading program similar to PGX. In the course of that year, he read the Pokémon series.

In December 1999, I went to the school board with a wake-up call — namely, that there are a significant number of children for whom RR does not work.

The trustees sloughed me off, gave me some RR public relations material, and stated that they were monitoring the program on an on-going basis.

I subsequently went back to the board with a detailed proposal involving screening children in kindergarten to identify the "high-risk" children using the CanStart program (Simner) and starting into PGX immediately with these children. A second part of my proposal dealt with children in grade 2 and above who still couldn't read.

True to form, the trustees sent my report to committee for consideration. While they were thinking things over, a local newspaper ran an excellent full-page feature on my son's reading story.

As a result of this article, I met with the minister of education. He was deeply troubled by the fact that my school board (the second largest in the province) had only one remedial reading program.

The school board's solution was to commission an 'independent' reading clinician to assess RR and PGX. To no one's surprise, given that the chosen expert had a decidedly whole language bias, the final report favoured RR.

Last summer, after five months of prodding, I finally achieved a meeting with board administration. It soon became obvious that they were determined to continue using the RR program for all at-risk children, despite mounting evidence that the program is totally ineffective for the children at highest risk.

Dr. Bonnie Grossen of the University of Oregon reports that RR does not raise overall school achievement levels. Furthermore, children who return to the classroom as 'recovered' students immediately begin falling behind again — their gains are not sustained. (<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~bgrossen/rr.htm>)

In Manitoba, RR success statistics are artificially inflated by judicious selection policies — only those children who are deemed likely to succeed are chosen to participate.

Why do these administrators cling to a program that is inferior to (and far more expensive than) others such as PGX? Why will they not even look at another program? Why will they not try something different for children whom everyone agrees RR has failed? It's not as if these children have anything to lose!

Although my son didn't get his Santa wish in time for Christmas, he did eventually get it. It is unfortunate that there are many other children who are not so lucky.

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