

A Better Way

No matter how hard they work, new teachers can't get good results with progressive methods.

By Kelly Brouwers

In the late 1980's, I attended the four-year concurrent education program at York University. Almost from day one of my teacher training experience, I was uncomfortable in York's program. I often complained to the professors that their course content didn't seem to be preparing me to "teach."

It seemed to me that most of our projects and assignments involved developing themed units, selecting fun activities for students to explore, and debating the discussion-generating power of various works of literature.

During reading and math courses, I often wondered aloud, "When will you be showing us how to teach the students?" and "How can I know if a student understands the activities he/she has been exposed to?" Of course, I was never given satisfactory answers to these questions.

In my final year, I practise-taught in a very difficult grade four classroom. I had trouble getting the students' attention. Further, it seemed that no matter how many "fun" activities I planned, the students were not learning very much.

In my desperation to bring the class under control, I asked a professor for some suggestions for classroom management techniques. The professor responded along the following lines: "Kelly, in my long career as an educator, I have experienced that classroom management cannot be taught. Either your students like you well enough to behave or they don't." She then suggested that I had perhaps chosen the wrong profession.

I was first discouraged, then angry. I knew in my heart that this professor must be wrong, but I was unsure how to find the truth I was longing for.

After teachers' college, I worked in a public school teaching grade one. I diligently worked to prepare and present the most engaging whole language activities imaginable.

In the school's other grade one classroom, however, the teacher was using a systematic phonics approach. My students seemed to lag way behind hers in almost every way. Her students read better, wrote neater, spelled with greater accuracy, solved math problems better, and generally appeared to have much more self-discipline and confidence.

By the end of the year, all of the students in that classroom could read fluently. Of my 21 students, 13 could barely read their own names.

In desperation, I referred my 13 non-readers to special ed, but all were denied it on the grounds that they were too young for remedial help. They had to wait until grade 4.

I left the board at the end of that year, to take a job at a private school, but I kept in touch with my old school, wanting to see what would become of my non-readers. None of them had caught up by the end of grade 3. (I guess they still weren't ready!) All began receiving some form of special ed in grade 4.

To this day, I am deeply upset that I set these students up to be poor achievers.

After that, I dedicated my spare time to trying to find out more about effective instruction. Two years after leaving the public system, I discovered, quite by accident, Direct Instruction. (DI)

At a lecture at Toronto's Sick Kids Hospital, I learned about the research findings at the teaching lab there. They had been conducting a field study of the Direct Instruction programs, witnessing dramatic results in students with a wide range of identified disabilities.

I resolved to give DI a try, and so that summer I, along with my teaching partner, attended a DI Instruction con-

ference in Eugene, Oregon. In September, we returned to the school prepared to teach our grade 7 special ed class to spell, using *Corrective Spelling Through Morphographs*.

It worked like a charm. Our students learned, and learned rapidly. More important, they were able to apply their knowledge in other settings, and became confident in doing so. As an added surprise, students who were discipline problems in other classes were motivated achievers in our spelling lessons. We rarely had to address student misbehaviour during those spelling sessions.

I guess it's not true that one is or is not born with good classroom management skills!

After a year of successful spelling instruction, I returned to DI conference to learn about other DI programs that could be incorporated into our classroom.

Many of our grade 7 students began their year more than five years behind. Prior to using DI, we had felt successful if we were able to bring their grade levels up by 12-16 months in a year. With DI, students were consistently able to master two to three grade levels in one school year.

Although I still deeply regret that I was unable to teach those 13 grade 1 students to read, I feel confident that with DI I will never make the same mistake again.

I have recently joined forces with my sister-in-law to make preparations for opening a DI private school in Ontario. I am committed to bringing DI to more teachers — and to more students.

(Kelly and Bethany Brouwers are currently seeking a business partner(s) with both capital and strong business expertise to help start their school. Anyone having a lead in this regard should contact them at peter.brouwers2@sympatico.ca or by calling 905-331-0557.)