

A Cure for Curtis

All children can learn —given proper instruction

by Judy Sumner

When I first met Curtis in 1994, he was a sturdy nine-year-old boy with a freckled face, blue eyes and an untidy mop of brown hair. Curtis had attended junior and senior kindergarten and grade one in the local separate school system, followed by two years in a private school for the learning-disabled. The methods used were whole language and whole word recognition. Despite this, when he came to the private school where I was teaching in September 1994, all he could read was the word “the” and his own name. According to his mother, he often wept alone at night because he could not learn to read. He had to be forced to go to school.

I began to teach Curtis to read by following the steps outlined by Nina Traub in *Recipe for Reading* (Educators’ Publishing Service, 1990). Traub’s method begins by teaching four things: a) the sounds represented by the letters of the alphabet; b) how to print the letters; c) how to spell and read two- and three-letter words from dictation; and d) how to read simple stories that use two- and three-letter words. Special training was required to teach Curtis how to blend the letters’ sounds together to make words. Here I followed the procedures outlined by Monica Foltzer in *Professor Phonics Gives Sound Advice* (The St. Ursula Academy, 1984), supplemented by methods described by R. Spalding and W.T. Spalding in *The Writing Road to Reading*. (William Morrow, 1986).

By January 1995, after about four months of instruction, Curtis was reading at an end-of-grade-one level, using the Open Court *Rainbow Bridge* reader. He could retell a story correctly in his own words when he had read it. He could print very neatly, and his spelling was good.

At the present time, almost three years after beginning at our school, Curtis is reading at a grade six level. His comprehension is good. He has learned cursive writing and writes original stories neatly with good spelling and reasonably good grammar. He can use capitals and punctuation marks correctly. He understands paragraphing but still tends to write run-on sentences. He can also add, subtract, multiply and divide using two- and three-digit numbers, and he can use these skills to solve written problems. He is currently working on decimals, fractions and geometry. Curtis can correctly label a blank map of North and Central America, marking countries, provinces, states, large bodies of water and the major Canadian cities. He has learned some of the rudiments of world history, including the Stone Age, the beginning of agriculture, the use of meals, the events leading to the discovery of the Americas, and the early settlement of Canada.

Curtis has also learned how to recognize different Canadian mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, and he has learned something of the internal structure of a frog (by dissecting a pickled one). Work on Canadian geography, geology and biology is in progress, including such topics as the origin of mountains, glaciers and the way animals are adapted to varying environmental conditions.

Curtis no longer hates school. In his father’s words: “He is a changed boy.”

Curtis provides a clear example of a child who failed to progress academically and, in consequence, hated school. This was not due to any lack of ability on his part, but rather to the

inadequacy of the methods that had been used to teach him. The most important thing that a young child can learn in school is to read and write his or her native language. Without these basic skills, no academic progress of any kind is possible and attending school becomes a humiliating nightmare.

The methods I used to teach Curtis are derived from a large body of scientific research which has been carried out over the past 60 years. Many present-day educators have unfortunately fallen under the influence of an ideology that has little respect for factual evidence or intellectual achievement. As a result, few teachers understand the methods I used, and few apply them in the classroom. There can be little doubt that the legions of “learning-disabled” children in Ontario schools could be taught perfectly well if adequate methods were used.

There is hope here for parents. If your children are not learning to read, buy the books I have mentioned and begin teaching them at home. The methods of Traub, Foltzer and Spalding work very well for children who cannot read at all. For older children who have learned to recognize a number of words by their overall appearance (sight words) but don’t understand the phonetic basis of our language, a modified approach is required. In such cases, I recommend the methods of Barbara Wilson (*The Wilson System*, 2nd edition, Millbury, Mass., 1989).

(Judy Sumner was educated as a nurse (R.N., B.Sc.N., M.Sc.N) and picked up her knowledge of teaching methods from various sources. She taught her own children to read and has worked as a teacher in a private school for three years.)