

The Loss of Our Faculties

Ontario's faculties of education are letting down their students.

By Martha Petrie

As a 22-year-old student at a concurrent B.A./B.Ed. program in 1989, I had no worries about the preparation I was getting in my final year — even though the first three years had provided me with very little information about learning how to teach.

Some memories include socializing at our professor's home, being videotaped in a mock-lesson with my peers as they pretended to be in kindergarten, trying to teach a math lesson to a group of four children while my peers looked on, and making a "do-re-mi" hand poster for music class. It was almost impossible not to get an "A".

I do not remember anything about what we were supposed to teach, other than to let children 'discover' everything on their own through activity centres. The most important thing was to make these centres FUN and EXCITING! We talked more about self-esteem than about what books were appropriate for each grade level.

The 14-page phonics chapter of our language arts textbook was filled with boring words and charts that were never explained and, so far as I could tell, my professors were right when they described phonics as a very small part of the entire reading process and said that most children would learn the rules and patterns in our language naturally, without any direct instruction. The chapter on phonics was skimmed over very quickly as we zeroed in on activity centres, language experience charts and other whole language techniques.

Later on, when I first began to think critically about my teacher training, I kept doubting myself. Perhaps I had been too immature to pay attention in class — or maybe my memory was faulty, I thought. So then I began asking other teachers what they remembered about teachers' college, and they all said the same thing. It didn't seem to matter whether it was 15 years ago or last year, or which faculty they at

tended. Teachers' college is useless, a waste of time, they all said. In the words of several colleagues, it was 'Mickey Mouse.'

For the first three years of my teaching career, I ran a very fun whole language classroom. The children felt loved and appreciated. My only goal was to make them happy. Of course, all of my students were passed on to the next grade level, regardless of achievement. In the same way, five out of my twenty children had been passed on to my grade 2 classroom when they were still writing strings of meaningless letters in their journals.

During the next two years, however, I was very fortunate to be assigned to a school that used *Open Court*, a systematic phonics program. I discovered that most children can read anything by the end of grade one if they are given direct phonics instruction. And, to my amazement, I didn't have to do away with holistic teaching! I used puppets, hands-on activities and lots of good-quality children's literature.

Yet the faculties of education are still brainwashing their students about the evils of phonics. Here is a quote from a recent *Globe and Mail* article by David Booth (OISE), Curt Dudley-Marling (York), Sharon Murphy (York), and Gordon Well (OISE).

"...the ability to work out sound-symbol relationships is not a prerequisite for beginning to read...Phonics instruction isolated from the context of reading of continuous texts grossly underestimates the complexity of the reading process and the abilities of learners. In particular, teachers who isolate phonics instruction from the reading of continuous texts deny students the opportunity to learn a variety of skills and knowledge while they are reading."

This quote was taken from an article written in response to Barbara Foorman's study that found that young children taught phonics were six times as likely to be reading at the end of the year as whole language children.

The quote from *The Globe and Mail* article sums up what I was taught at teachers' college nine years ago. From personal experience, however, I now know that:

- systematic, direct phonics instruction is a very important part of learning to read;
- the ability to read words quickly, accurately and effortlessly is critical to skillful reading comprehension; and
- phonemic awareness training and systematic phonics with a patient teacher will ensure that over 80% of grade one children will be able to read independently by the end of the year.

I also know that immersion in meaningful, connected text is critical. Enthusiastic and dedicated teachers must give children multi-sensory learning experiences and quality children's literature, while teaching them how to connect what they are learning in phonics lessons to the reading of enjoyable children's books.

And, finally, I know that, unless teachers are allowed to observe classrooms where most children are reading and writing independently at the end of grade one, they will continue to teach the way they were taught at teachers' college, rather than the way that produces the highest levels of achievement for all children, regardless of background, behaviour or parental support.

(Mrs. Petrie was a teacher at St. Francis of Assisi in Stroud, Ontario. The Simcoe Separate School Board shut down the school's systematic phonics program after two years, despite phenomenal reading scores and teacher/parent protests.

Mrs. Petrie is currently the program director for TAKEPART Learning Systems in Barrie, Ontario, giving reading development workshops to parents and teachers.)