

Intra-Curricular Activities

Until its language curriculum is improved, Ontario's test scores will remain stagnant.

By Marjorie Gann

In the course of its extensive educational reforms, the Mike Harris government introduced new provincial curricula in all subjects. The revised Ontario curricula were designed to be more rigorous and to reflect a more traditional educational philosophy, with an emphasis on basic skills, preparation for the job market, and accountability.

New province-wide testing in language arts in grades 3, 6, and 10 meant that the new curricula could not be shelved and ignored. But the results on the provincial tests have not been encouraging.

On the most recent grade 10 literacy test, 85% of Academic students passed the test, while only 38% of Applied students and 14% of students in "Locally-Developed Programs" passed. On the most recent grade 3 tests, an average of only 52.5% met or surpassed the standard, and for the grade 6 tests it was 53%. Although the grade 3 results were slightly improved compared to the previous year, the grade 6 and 10 results were worse.

Why is the new curriculum not producing results? How helpful will it be to new teachers seeking guidance in planning their courses? A close reading may provide some clues.

Regrettably, this document is a carelessly-edited outline that will help no one plan lessons or set reasonable objectives for this week, next month, or the school year.

Its skills lists are poorly sequenced. Solid research on how to teach reading and spelling effectively is ignored.

And underlying the high-sounding ideals is a palpable tension between the conservative factions who lobbied the provincial government for basic skills, and the Ministry bureaucrats who held firm to the progressive platitudes that have dominated educational discourse in Ontario since the Hall-Dennis Report in 1968.

The Phonics Category

Let's examine the curriculum's phonics sequence in the writing strand.

Grade 1: "use phonics to spell unfamiliar words"

An inexperienced teacher may reasonably ask, "Which phonics patterns? Which unfamiliar words?"

Grade 2: "use phonics to spell more difficult words (e.g., words of more than one syllable, words ending in -ing)"

Although it seems obvious that grade 2 students will apply phonics to harder words, it is also true that many of them still need to review the rules for long and short vowels so they can spell 'cap' and 'cape' and 'lick' and 'like' correctly.

Grade 3: "use phonics and memorized spelling rules (e.g., some verbs ending with a consonant double the consonant before -ed and -ing; stop/stopped, signal/signaling) to increase accuracy in spelling"

Actually, these are examples of two distinct rules. The rule for 'stopped' is the 1 + 1 + 1 rule (double the consonant in one-syllable words with a medial vowel followed by a single consonant). For 'signaling', Canadians generally double the consonant in two-syllable words, like 'begin' and 'forget', that place the stress on the second syllable.

Grade 4: "use phonics and knowledge of word structure and meaning to spell words correctly"

Isn't this what we do from grade 2 up? How can any teacher, much less a new one, plan a year's work on the basis of this objective?

For some odd reason, phonics is far more emphasized for spelling than for reading. The grade 1 reading curriculum mentions phonics only as an aid to building vocabulary (although pictures are considered more important).

Although the Ontario language curriculum is presented as being sequential and systematic, it consistently misses the mark. Skills sequencing is random, and important skills are omitted. Holistic methodology dominates, while direct instruction from well-designed textbooks is overlooked.

In its present form, the new curriculum will not remedy the poor results on provincial tests. At present, Ontario teachers are working hard but achieving mediocre results at best.

This is in part because they are following an inferior curriculum, in part because they are forbidden to use highly-effective programs, such as the "Open Court" reading series and the "Communicating Skills" language workbooks. These, along with other excellent programs, are not on Ontario's Trillium List (the list of materials authorized for use in school).

Changes in the provincial curriculum will take time to implement, and Ontario students should not have to wait. I would suggest that the Minister add Dave Martin's clear, sequential, and Canadian *Communicating Skills: A Language Arts Program* (Grades 3 - 8, Thomson Nelson) to the Trillium List.

The Minister should also permit the temporary use (pending a Canadian version) of the phonics-based "Open Court" reading series, which has been used successfully by Centennial School in Cambridge, Ontario, achieving a 500% increase in the number of students meeting standard on the last provincial tests.

Until these changes are implemented, student achievement on the provincial tests is likely to remain stagnant.

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