

Open Court – Open Doors

By Dale Tydd-Whiting

Last year, we switched schools. We moved out of the dark and into the light.

That may sound dramatic, but that's the only way I can describe it. My children had spent four years in a school where phonics, direct instruction and real expectations for children were literally laughed at. Last September, we moved to Buchanan Park School in Hamilton – a few short miles in actual distance, but light years away in attitude and results!

In the 1994/95 school year, a new principal had come to Buchanan. She was determined, she was hard-working, and she really cared about *how* children learned to read. As a matter of fact, reading, spelling, and discipline were (and are) some of her prime focuses.

The principal brought the *Open Court* reading program into the school at the request of the parents' group. She actually fought for it – and for them. Imagine!

The program began as a pilot for grade 1, and it was totally free of charge – thanks again to the principal who arranged for the publisher to supply the *Open Court* materials. This past year, 1995/96, the program was expanded to cover senior kindergarten and grade 2. In addition, it was used minimally in grades 3 to 5 – minimally because, having no phonics base, the older children unfortunately were not in a position to benefit from much of the program.

My son was fortunate enough to be enrolled in the grade 1 class in 95/96. Like the other 28 children in his class, he was reading by April at the latest.

Open Court has workbooks for each student with step-by-step exercises, beginning with pages to learn and practise printing the letters of the alphabet. These pages progress to simple dot-to-dot pictures to practise letter order. Next come consonant sounds and spelling. Listening to sounds as the teacher says words, the student decides whether the sound of the day is at the beginning or end of the word. Let's say that 'm' is the first consonant. After the child has printed both upper and lower case 'm's', the teacher says the words that are pictured on the student page

Organization for Quality Education, September 1996

and the child prints the letter ‘m’ at the beginning or end of the word, eg milk, ham, gum.

In this program, the vowels are taught along with the consonants. There are simple and enjoyable stories which the teacher reads with the children and which they then take home to practise. The stories are short and fun, and they feature common letter combinations and sounds. They concentrate on the consonants or vowels learned that week.

Nothing is over the expected “frustration level”. Each child can “blend” most of the words, and each book builds on what has already been mastered. No one is rushed or left behind. The lessons are simple and straightforward, directly instructed by the teacher to the whole class on the chalk board.

As a volunteer in the class, I saw first-hand the enthusiasm the children had for their lessons. It is amazing what a real understanding of phonics gives the children. They were confident and excited. Ken Goodman wrote in his book *What’s Whole in Whole Language* that “phonics is an insult to a child’s intelligence”, but these children were too busy reading to be insulted.

As the children worked through the consonant and vowel sounds, the exercises became progressively more difficult. They began writing whole words and then progressed to sentences. There was just enough repetition to cement the sounds in the children’s brains.

The teacher in my son’s classroom, as well as probably all the other teachers in the school, is “sold” on the benefits of this systematic phonics program. Three schools in Hamilton are already using the *Open Court* program, and interest is being piqued in many other schools. The teachers at Buchanan Park are open-minded and willing to try whatever works. In addition, they are helped by the encouragement of their principal.

Although the children are all at different levels, they are all being given a solid phonics base on which to build their continually-improving skills. This seems to be working very well for them. They have the confidence and desire to learn more – something which the whole language lovers claim phonics cannot offer. They have not seen what I have seen at Buchanan Park!

I realize even more now what a waste my daughter's first four years were, immersed as she was in a school of "facilitators" and whole language/child-centred learning fanatics. After four years of this, I began to think that that was all that was available. Now I know there is still hope for children and parents. The doors are slowly opening – Buchanan Park is proof!

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