

# Reinventing the Wheel

*Only in North America is a teacher's job perceived as a constant act of inspirational invention.*

**By Natalie Kramer**

*(Mrs. Kramer is a parent in Rockville, Maryland.)*

My child is in grade 5 in a French school in Maryland. He has been reading flawlessly for five years. He can do addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division in his sleep, and he is now studying more advanced math and geometry with great enthusiasm and enjoyment.

What is the secret? There is no secret. He is systematically taught to do these things. Some of the learning is rote; most is not. All of it is structured, systematic, and sequential.

The curricular programs at his school use traditional, direct teaching approaches. The children do not 'discover' new skills and knowledge themselves at their own pace.

Instead, the school program sets the pace for them and the teachers help them adjust to it. They are told what to learn and how to learn it. Slowly, in measured increments, they are given more freedom as to how they organize their work, both at home and in class.

Who sets the school program? Well, here is the bombshell: the National Ministry of Education of France. Education is important enough to the French public to make it a national priority.

I was educated in Russia where school programs were also set by a central authority. I was in classes of 35 or 40 students. A sizeable proportion of my classmates had alcoholic parents. Many came from broken homes. Few of us were regularly read to and some of our parents were virtually illiterate. Most of us lived below the poverty line by today's standards.

Nevertheless, we could all read by age 8, do basic math by ages 9 or 10, and produce reasonably well-written text by age 10 or 11. Most of us had basic familiarity with major concepts in science, geography, and history.

All of us knew some rudimentary English, and our spelling, grammar, and sentence structure in English were better, in my assessment, than those of most of my son's American friends. As for creativity, I don't believe we are any less creative than our American-born counterparts.

When I hear educators talk about striving to reach a 70% pass rate in standards that would be considered modest compared with those imposed on (and met by!) nearly all of my peers, I cannot help but see such efforts as naïve, albeit well-intentioned, attempts to reinvent the wheel.

When I was growing up in Leningrad, all future teachers learned, for example, that multiplication tables up to 8 take second graders until April to master if they practise four times a week for 15 minutes and get three homework assignments a week.

These teachers-to-be also learned that teaching multiplication tables solely by rote is boring, and that combining rote memorization with interesting applications yields better results. They were also taught in which proportion to combine rote memorization with applications and how the optimal proportion changes with the age of the students.

Sounds scientific? It is, since in Russia teaching is regarded as every bit as complex as medicine and law, with a similarly coherent body of knowledge that prospective teachers need to learn.

Only in North America is a teacher's job perceived as a constant act of inspirational invention. The constant adaptation to local and individual 'needs' is little more than an excuse for not having an infrastructure supplying uniformly trained and competent teachers.

I am often told that my child achieves good academic results because he is bright and would do well in any school. That is very nice to hear, but unfortunately it is not true. My

child does well only when he is taught well.

My son has two teachers (his Russian teacher and the teacher at his French school) who use time-honoured, traditional methods of teaching. They do dictations, recitations, and repetitive rhythmic drills in grammar and spelling with their students. The methodology is specified in the scripted, sequential lesson plans that they both follow. The results are impressive.

In his English classroom, on the other hand, where the teachers are not familiar with the notion of scripted or sequential curricula, the results are quite different. The teachers improvise the program as they go along under the pretext of trying to suit it to individual class needs.

My son had been doing nearly as poorly in these English classes as all of his classmates until I started tutoring him. After that, things quickly improved. It is true that my son is easy to teach, but you do have to teach him if you want him to learn.

Left to his own devices, which is what the child-centred, unstructured instruction in his English classroom had essentially done, he invented spelling and sentence structure, without getting close to inventing the correct forms. His classmates, whose parents do not fill in the gaps left by the teachers, still invent spelling in grade 5 and some of them are still far from being fluent readers.

We have a saying in Russian that truth comes from the mouth of a suckling. One time, when my son was 8 and thoroughly confused by the homework in his English class, he said: "Mom, why doesn't my French teacher teach my English teacher how to teach?"

If only things were so simple.

*(Adapted with permission from the May, 1998 issue of The Council for Basic Education's magazine)*