

# Being of Real Help

By Malkin Dare

---

Because literacy is so important, well-meaning people in hundreds of Canadian organizations are hard at work every day trying to help the many Canadians who struggle with reading.

For example, thousands of volunteers are going into schools to listen to kids read. Hockey players and politicians read stories aloud and tell kids how important reading is. Books are donated, committees are formed, millions of dollars are raised, editorials are written – all trying to help remediate Canada's serious literacy problem.

Yet, nothing changes. The percentage of Canadians who can't read well enough to meet most everyday demands, according to Statistics Canada, holds steady at about 42%.

Why is all this effort not paying off?

The answer may lie in the nature of the effort. If you look closely, you will notice that almost every program is based on the assumption that poor readers just need to read more. Essentially, the thrust is either to make poor readers want to read more and/or to make sure they do.

Why do we keep on with these efforts if they are not paying off? After all, one definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

The answer may be that nobody knows what else to do. Most people presume that poor readers have already received first-class reading instruction at school. After all, this is what education leaders are saying.

And if their reading instruction has already been taken care of, then the source of poor readers' problems must be either that they are unmotivated or that they need more practice, or both. So it makes sense to make them want to read a lot and to give them the opportunity to do so.

But what if many poor readers are in trouble because they have not yet received the necessary first-class instruction at school? If this is the case, then all the motivation and practice in the world will not help them.

Regular readers of the *SQE Forum* will not be surprised when I raise the possibility that some Canadian teachers may not be providing first-class reading instruction. After all, the faculties of education give teachers very little training on how to teach reading, and most Canadian school boards promote a flawed method called Balanced Literacy.

The Balanced Literacy approach uses memorization and guessing, instead of direct, systematic phonics teaching. In fact, Balanced Literacy explicitly rejects the use of systematic phonics, spelling, or grammar instruction.

Recent developments in Scotland (Clackmannanshire and Dunbartonshire) show that students taught with systematic phonics become excellent readers. In Dunbartonshire, education leaders expect to have no 11-year-old children unable to read at grade level by the end of this school year. By contrast, Ontario's provincial tests show that at least 36% of 11-year-olds are unable to read at grade level.

There is much other research showing that systematic phonics is the best way to teach children to read. As *Time Magazine* reported, "Indeed, the evidence is so strong that if the subject under discussion were, say, the treatment of the mumps, there would be no discussion." Professor Keith Stanovich, a world authority on teaching reading, writes, "That direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates early reading acquisition is one of the most well-established conclusions in all of behavioural science."

And yet most Canadian teachers are still not using systematic phonics to teach their students to read. Without systematic phonics, all of the volunteer work and all of the donated money are close to useless.

It is a shame to waste so many people's time and money on programs that can't work. It's also regrettable that poor readers are being set up for further failure.

Instead of continuing to pour our national resources into remedial efforts that are not working, I suggest that Canadians instead direct their energies at convincing educators to use systematic phonics in the first place.