

Reading for their Lives By Malkin Dare

Despite the horrible consequences of not learning to read in grade 1, more than a third of Canadian children are being allowed to reach the end of grade 1 without learning to read properly. Even though almost all children can become good readers if they are taught properly, most grade 1 teachers are not using best practices.

Children who can't read by the end of grade 1 are statistically very unlikely ever to become good readers. As such, they are more likely to drop out of school before graduation and much less likely to attend university. They are also much more apt to turn to crime and drug abuse and, in the case of the girls, become single parents. All of this in turn affects such things as their future earnings and how long they will live.

Despite these well-known and uncontested facts, year after year more than a third of Canadian children are being allowed to reach the end of grade 1 without learning to read properly.

If more than a third of seven-year-old Canadian children were on the verge of starvation, there would be a public outcry. Yet most people appear to be okay with the intellectual starvation of hundreds of thousands of children every year.

It must be that everyone thinks that a third of all kids are *unable* to learn to read. But this is completely wrong.

In fact, virtually everyone is capable of becoming a good reader. Here is a quote from well-known educator and professor of special education at the University of Oregon, Siegfried Engelmann. "During the years I have worked with kids and teachers, I have never seen a kid with an IQ of over 80 that could not be taught to read in a timely manner (one school year), and I have worked directly or indirectly (as a trainer) with thousands of them."

Professor Engelmann famously offered \$US1000 to anyone who could produce a student whom he couldn't teach to read in one year. He still has his money.

If Professor Engelmann is right that all children can be taught to read by the end of grade 1 at the latest, then why are so many students falling by the wayside? The answer can essentially be found in the difference between the way that Professor Engelmann teaches children to read and the way most Canadian schools teach.

Professor Engelmann maintains that good teaching is a matter of clarity and precision and careful sequencing and practice and feedback. He has developed a teaching approach based on direct instruction. Direct instruction programs break learning down into tiny steps and ensure that no student goes on to the next step in the sequence until he or she has mastered the present one.

Most Canadian educators find Professor Engelmann's approach too impersonal and teacher-directed. They tend to believe that good teachers are charismatic and spontaneous, that children learn best when they are highly motivated and engaged, and that methodical teaching approaches will stifle children's natural creativity and ability to solve problems. However, there is no evidence for their beliefs.

At Kobi Nazrul, a British school in the slums of London, England, the teachers use meticulous, fast-paced, and precise instruction, through carefully organized, highly-engaging activities that leave nothing to chance, no room for confusion. These teachers

monitor their students' progress carefully and intervene immediately as soon as a student starts to fall behind. The intervention includes a great deal of extra practice and feedback, but no "special programs" or ability grouping.

Kobi Nazrul students are not easy to teach. Only a few of the mostly African and South Asian students at this school speak English at home. Well over half qualify for free meals. If the children at Kobi Nazrul can be taught to read and write, then surely Canadian children can too. Every child at this school can read English with enthusiasm and understanding by the age of seven. Year after year. Every child.

This should be the birthright of every single Canadian seven-year-old as well.

Mrs. Dare, a former teacher, now tutors struggling readers in Waterloo, Ontario.