

The Speakers' Corner

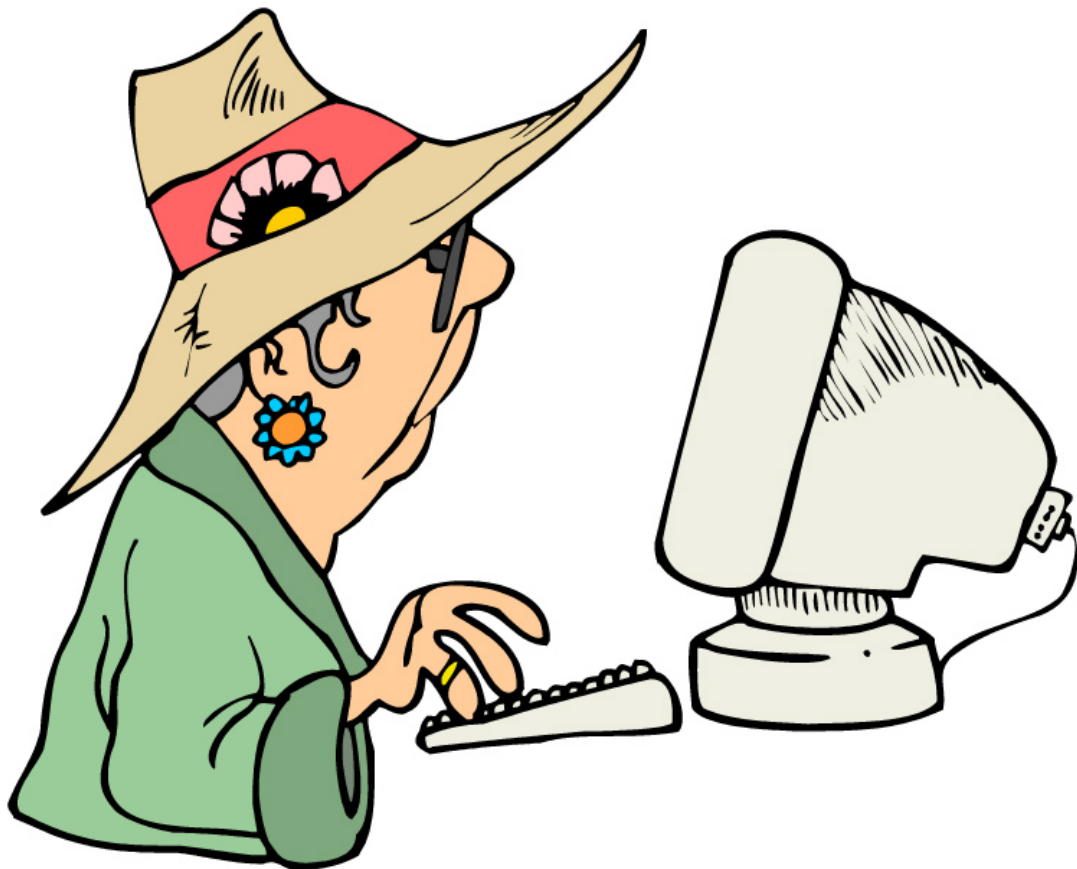


Educational Pontification
By Jean

Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, London, is a place where every Sunday morning a person can stand on a soap box and lecture anyone with the patience to listen.

I apologize in advance for my pontification on educational subjects. I would never call myself an 'expert', and the following short essays are simply my opinion. I sometimes have a compulsion to write, and these page length pieces were written for the old Primary Success magazine, one or two in each copy.

Like the visitors to Hyde Park, listen or walk on!



A Good Teacher

What makes a good teacher? The idea of merit pay continues to surface, and this quote comes to mind.....

"The problem with this kind of research was neatly summed up by one '60s reviewer of several hundred such studies who stated: 'Some teachers were preferred by administrators; some were liked by pupils; and some taught in classes where there were substantial pupil gains - and generally speaking these were not the same teachers'."

So, as I research this subject, I find a wide variety of opinions. Many of the sources put these first: patience, consideration, impartiality, interest in students, and humour. These are important, but fall into the 'liked by pupils' group. Administrators often think that teachers who are on time, do great paper-work, are team players and agree philosophically with the administrator are the best.

Here's my list - I do not ask that you agree, but perhaps it would be a good exercise to make your own list!

1. Constantly explore and update your own philosophy for teaching the central subjects, especially literacy. Teachers who advocate one popular method to the exclusion of others will not be benefiting the students. Too often primary teachers get on a band-wagon, and throw out all other wisdom. Keep learning, try many programs and keep what works best from each to help your students learn.

2. Know how children learn. Learn the modalities, and discover the strengths and weaknesses of your children who have difficulties. Discover the learning disabilities, and teach to the strengths - each child has a strength that will make learning easier.

3. Good teachers explain things well - going from what the children know and understand to higher content, speaking clearly in language the children understand. Don't over explain! Too much talk-talk-talk and your kiddies tune out. Keep on topic, ask questions and keep the children involved as they expand their knowledge.

4. Review every day in every subject. Without review, concepts are not retained.

5. Model and practice what you want the children to do. Spending lots of time doing this will save time in the long term.

6. Don't try to reinvent the wheel. Some teachers start from scratch every day, planning lessons in every subject. In the first place, you don't have time to do this and keep your sanity. Then, it is a rare teacher who can make all these lessons be sequential so the learning flows naturally from one understanding to the next. Find programs that suit you, and follow them. Let others do the work!

7. Have high expectations. It is amazing how your students will come up to what you expect from them.

8. Be neat and organized. I know - this is one of the things I nag about! But it is important..... Keep your room tidy, your desktop clean, the bulletin boards attractive and seasonal, your paper-work up to date. This does wonders for your mental health! And you must model how you want the children to act.

9. Teach your students how to be organized, too. Insist that their desks are tidy and that things are not allowed on the floor. Teach them how to organize their work and expect neat printing,

10. Take responsibility. Don't blame the parents or the child for problems. It is your responsibility to teach the kids, and parents can help - but this is YOUR job!

11. Keep your cool. Don't yell at the kids, or adults, either! You will never win this way - the moment the other person gets defensive - you have lost.

12. Be a good time manager. We are always short of time, so don't let it be wasted. Manage your school day minutes efficiently, and your own time, too. Set a time when you will get to school each morning and the latest time you will leave to go home - and stick to it except for meetings. Staying at school until 6:00 p.m. is not efficient - and neither is taking work home with you (other than report cards). You will just become tired and frustrated.

Are You a Good Teacher?

Schools are always trying to raise student achievement. Most research suggests that the benefit of improving the quality of teaching is far greater than other interventions such as lowering class size, however unpopular this may be with teachers! But what is good teaching and how can we assess it?

Try doing a self-assessment on the following topics. Discuss them with your colleagues, too.

With the students:

- Plan your lessons well. One lesson should follow the next in sequence, with review of important learning.
- Always know your goals - long term and short term.
- Lessons should follow a pattern of review, instruction, hands-on activity, written activity, conclusion and discussion.
- Skills should be modeled frequently.
- Be organized in your lesson plans, the materials, and assessment.
- Materials should be ready and organized for each part of the lesson.
- Set high academic standards. Also set high standards for behaviour, written assignments and neatness.
- Assess frequently, using written tests, anecdotal notes and observation.
- The classroom should be free of negative behaviour, from the students or the teacher. The atmosphere should be peaceful and free from tension.
- You are as good a teacher as the learning of your lowest student. It is easy to teach bright kiddies, but it takes a great teacher to help the most challenged learner advance to the best of his/her abilities.
- Establish routines and insist on them.
- Have patience.
- Maintain a sense of humour.
- Respect and listen to your students. Treat them as if they are your own children.
- Give praise that is well deserved.
- Have a classroom that is a pleasure! Keep it neat, decorate it well, and change it often.

Personally:

- Build good working and communicative relationships with colleagues, parents, community, students, and administrators.
- Pace yourself and try not to accomplish everything all at once.
- A good teacher should be a good learner. Never stop learning to do things better. For example, if you are not searching for better ways to teach every child in your class to read, you are not doing your best. You can do this throughout your career and as you keep things that work well and throw out things that don't give the results you want, you will continue to improve as a teacher.
- Try new things - new programs, new themes, new ideas. Even if they do not turn out the way you expect, parts will be good and can be incorporated into your day. You will be learning!
- Technology can be very useful - learn to use all the technology that is available.
- Become familiar with/involved with curriculum issues and development.
- Be adaptable - roll with the punches.....There will always be surprises, many of them unpleasant.
- Maintain good health and spirit so you will have the energy to keep up to the busy little people.
- Take advantage of staff development opportunities.
- Practice time management.
- Laugh every day!

Saving Your Sanity

Here are some teachers' ideas to lessen stress in your busy life.....

1. Prioritize. I'm not talking about the little things, I'm talking about the big ones. Family first, yourself second, job third. I know others believe teaching comes first, but for me, my job comes second to my family and my sanity. You have got to put yourself before the job or you will burn out quickly in this profession. It is just too demanding. Also, you only raise your family once. Don't have the regrets of putting the job before time with them.

2. All the special projects are wonderful learning experiences, but not all at once! When you see all the wonderful ideas that other teachers are doing it is easy to feel like you want to do them all. That is impossible. When you see an idea for a fun project to go with a unit, do it. Then when that project is complete begin looking for another one. I make notes of what I do and what works, then the next year if I liked the project I do it again and add more to the unit. My units are built over years, not days. I just try to add a couple of new things each year.

3. Not all lessons are required to have a fantastic, eye catching, tap dancing teacher. Sometimes it is okay to just present the lesson as it is in the teacher's guide. Not everything has to be a dog and pony show. You end up with a three-ring circus!

4. Not every paper must have a mark at the top. When we are practicing a skill I do things with the children. If we do it together I don't mark it. This saves my marking time for things that actually must go in the book. At my school we are supposed to take two marks per week per subject. I am not an over-achiever in that area. I pick and choose what I want to take a mark on and only put marks on those items. Everything else we go over together and review the correct answers. I think the students learn more from this than if I just stick a mark at the top and hand it back. If parents ask I just tell them we did that paper together.



5. Mark all you can with the individual child in class. This is worth far more to the child's learning than marking after school.

6. Don't be afraid to say no."

My Advice

The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

If I could only give one piece of advice to teachers, it would be this: continue to be a life-long learner. The moment you feel you know the best way to teach children to read you will have closed your mind to other methods and improvement.

The following is my experience.....

I began teaching primary in 1960. From that time until 1988 we used sight word basals - the Ginn 720 series was the last of a long line. Contrary to modern opinion the lessons were interesting, well planned and many skills were taught. These sight word basals worked very well, and most students learned to read fluently by the end of grade two. I thought I was doing the very best for my students.

Then the principal had the primary teachers in my school take a course in the use of 'Project Read', a sequential phonics program that was quite scripted. It was for use as remediation with a low group, to be taught by the classroom teacher in the classroom. The following year I had a grade two class with five low kiddies who came to me with very limited reading skills. The principal had a few talks with me, and I guess I would have to say 'pressured' me into teaching Project Read to this group. I protested, saying the children would hate it, the program had no interest or imagination..... but I tried it. We loved it! All five students were reading fluently above grade level by Easter of the year, and I found myself enjoying it thoroughly. After teaching for all those years I learned how to correctly teach phonics, something I hadn't known before.

The next year I taught grade one, and modified the sequential phonics program for whole class lessons, plus using the sight word basals. The children became excellent readers. That class had a number of learning disabled kiddies, and I discovered that one girl could not learn phonics at all but could read by learning the sight words, and several boys could not remember sight words at all but learned to read through phonics. Now, I patted myself on the back..... I knew the best way to teach reading.

Two years later a new principal arrived with a new philosophy - whole language. He destroyed all the basals as he could find and insisted that we all teach through literature. As you can imagine, I protested louder than anyone - but there was no way out. I tried it - and had test scores to prove that my kids were not reading nearly as well, but that didn't matter - after all, testing was considered terrible for kids' self esteem! But even when protesting, I did see some interesting things in whole language and I learned that the students did get enjoyment and benefit from reading more trade books. I discovered that a sequential sight word and phonics programs could be enhanced with many of the literature ideas. Now I knew the best way to teach reading!

That principal left and I began to teach Learning Assistance. There were lots of students being referred - the teachers using whole language were not reaching the slower learners, many of whom should have been taught in the classroom. Once in L.A., I worked to find the students' strengths. Several students did not respond to phonics or sight word programs. It took me longer than it should to discover that these children were kinesthetic learners. Their auditory and visual senses were disabled, but they learned when printing, or acting out with hand motions or body motions as they learned the reading vocabulary. I began to put a lot more movement and kinesthetic strategies into my lessons.

After 'retirement', I began writing programs for primary teachers. I also did a lot of research online, and learned many more things from the newer programs that are used. I know that I do not have all the answers. I have lots of good answers, but there is always more out there!

So I understand teachers being resistant to change. I have been there. But improvement only comes through change and the ability to be open to try new things. It helps to want to learn more and be willing to try different programs, but if a teacher is not willing he/she may have to be pushed.

Be a life-long learner!

Teaching Reading - The Ultimate Answer

What is the best way to teach children to read?

Guiding Rule #1. Children have individual differences, therefore children learn in different ways.

Guiding Rule #2. Optimum learning occurs when the lessons are sequential and explicit.

And there it is! After the hundred years of the 'Reading Wars', common sense gives us these two concepts. The closer a teacher comes to completely fulfilling the two rules, the better the students will be learning to read. Unfortunately the two rules are deceptively simple!

The students at the top of our classes will teach themselves to read. Once they have been shown the way, they will naturally understand how words are built and will remember the reading vocabulary with a minimum of guidance. They become fluent readers early and will enjoy reading. This top 20% of children really don't need us in order to succeed! As the learning curve goes down, the two rules become more and more important. At the bottom of the curve are the handicapped students; the ones with learning disabilities, ESL students, etc. Children, especially those at the bottom of the curve, will be cheated of the education they deserve to the extent that the rules are not being followed.

Rule #1

How do children differ in their learning modalities?

Students learn to read through the visual and auditory senses, and to a lesser degree, the kinesthetic sense.

Visual learners are able to remember the 'look' of words and are able to differentiate between words that are similar. Reading is a visual procedure, so children who are strong visual learners will generally learn to read more easily than children who have difficulty learning through the visual sense. The curve of visual learners goes from students who can remember a word from one showing to visually disabled students who may only recall a word after hundreds of showings - if at all, and who may see the word differently each time.

Auditory learners learn best through phonics and the letter sounds. They hear the sounds accurately and are able to blend the sounds to decode unknown words. Some children understand and use phonics easily and automatically, and again the curve descends to students who do not hear or reproduce sounds accurately and because of this are unable to blend words and use phonics to help them read.

Kinesthetic learners are helped by printing, by feeling letters and words through hand and body movements.

How does this apply to reading methods?

Visual learners need to be taught a sight reading vocabulary, especially in the early stages of reading. Auditory learners need to be taught the letter sounds and how to apply them. Students need to be taught both methods: a sight method because reading is a visual procedure and phonics in order to decode unfamiliar words.

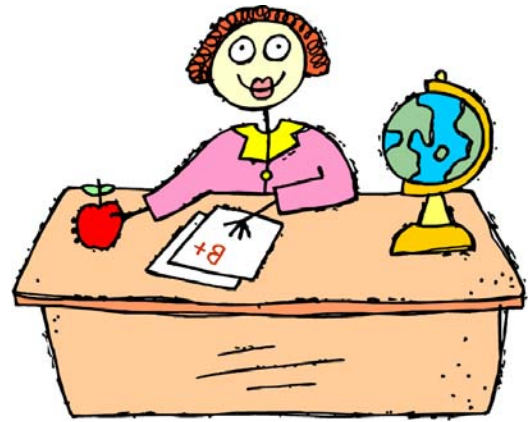
Teachers of beginning readers in our schools today will tell you that they do teach sight words and phonics, and that they do understand individual differences. They will say they do teach a variety of methods. Why then do they have students who are not reading well? Why is it necessary to send children out of the classroom to learn to read from Special Education teachers or others? The teachers may be following Rule #1 and have students not learning to their potential.

Rule #2

What are sequential and explicit lessons?

Teaching sequentially means that one lesson follows the previous one, with new skills added gradually to the previously taught skills that have been mastered. The teacher gives explicit lessons to teach the skills in a logical sequence. In general, this means that the teacher is following a series where the lessons have been programmed to follow one another in a logical sequence.

An explicit reading lesson will also follow a pattern. Each day there is a review of previously taught skills, there is a segment where a new skill is explicitly taught, the students do hands-on and group oral reading, they do individual written practice and the lesson ends with a review of what was learned. Every child reads orally each day, reads silently and does some written work to practice what they have learned.



Why do teachers dispute this?

Teachers have been trained to believe that teaching children to read through 'authentic' literature is best, and they have a stake in continuing to do what they know. It is very difficult for most teachers to change their beliefs.

Something has happened to primary education in the past twenty years. The process has become more important than the product. The process of literature-based teaching is not suitable for many children in the classroom and most students are not learning to their potential, but teachers excuse the results as less important than the philosophy. The product should be reading excellence for all, but this is not happening. (Teachers also take offense to the word 'product', but the end result of the teaching is of great importance.)

What about 'discovery' and 'critical thinking'? Learning through discovery only works well for the top students, and especially when learning to read, leaves the middle and lower children at a severe disadvantage. If reading is a natural process, then why do so many children have difficulty? Hands-on activities are necessary to the learning process for all students, but letting students learn when they are ready to discover for themselves is disastrous. Literature based lessons do not necessarily teach critical thinking skills. These skills can be encouraged in whatever lessons are being taught.

Teachers believe that students must be interested and entertained in order to learn. They believe that doing sequential explicit programs will be 'boring' and that students will not enjoy reading. This is, of course, a fallacy. Good teachers make all lessons interesting and fun, and children are happy when they feel that they are learning to read. Children feel safe and comfortable with routine, and enjoy their success as they master skills. Also, when sequential lessons are taught and mastery is expected, children are always working at their comfort level.

What is the 'ultimate' way to teach all children to read?

The best way to teach every child in the classroom to read is to teach both a sequential phonics program and a sequential sight word program. Both visual learners and auditory learners will be progressing to their potential. All students will learn a large sight reading vocabulary and have the ability to decode new words. But this is not all that a good teacher should do!

There is benefit to literature-based reading. Students need to have the teacher read books aloud to them, and they need to know that they can read trade books themselves and enjoy them. This

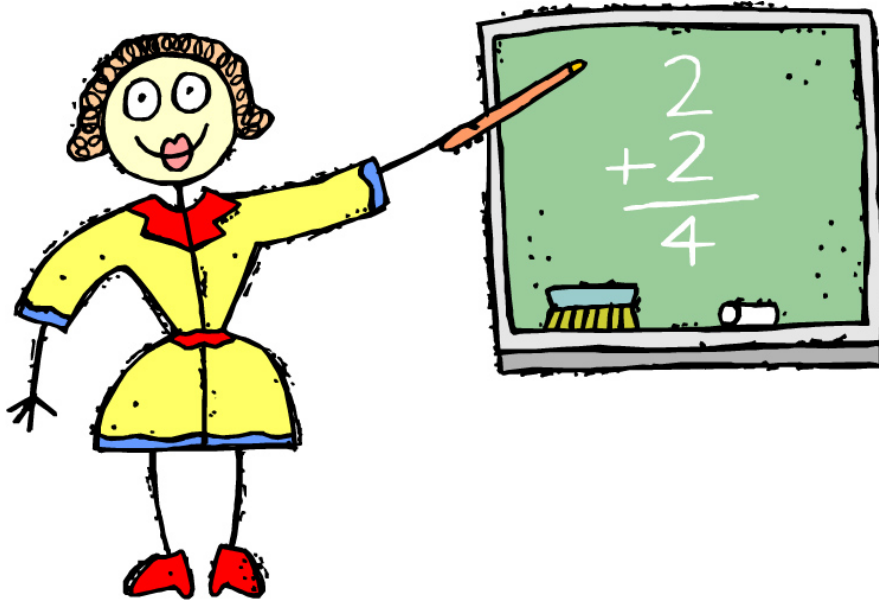
important third part of an ultimate program ties the sight word teaching and phonics together and applies it. The teacher gives guided reading lessons with interesting material.

Teachers who try this will be amazed! Their students will be reading far above previous years. They will also find that Learning Assistance and Special Education teachers are only needed to reinforce the lessons and to help the severely learning disabled students. Often a classroom aide or parent volunteer can give the lower students extra oral reading practice, as more reading lessons are usually not necessary. All children will be getting what they need in the classroom from the classroom teacher.

How does a teacher find time each day for three reading programs?

Most early primary teachers already spend half of each day doing language arts related exercises. It is simply a matter of scheduling. The phonics can be taught to the whole class in half an hour. The sight reading program will likely need homogeneous grouping and so an hour will be needed to give the group lessons. It is important that the phonics and sight reading lessons be taught each day. The literature-based lesson and the teacher-reading time will take another hour, with a whole-class guided reading lesson using trade books.

Preparation of these lessons could be a problem, unless the teacher is following simple programs to teach the sight word and the phonics sections. These two parts need to have explicit sequential lessons that are simple to follow, simple to teach and have everything needed so that preparation is at a minimum. The literature section can be done at the teacher's discretion. Primary Success Publications has programs to teach sight words and phonics that are simple and very effective.



Drop-In Visitors

I was reading the comments from teachers on-line complaining about people dropping into the classroom, and they thought that it was annoying and the value for supervisors was limited. I began to chuckle!

For many years (in the 1970s and '80s) we taught in an 'open-area' school. It was thought to be very cutting edge and modern. It taught us a lot, and we had good learning situations, not because of the open-area but in spite of it. Each teacher had to be aware of noise at all times, and when others were testing or doing work of extra importance we had to be almost whisper quiet. We tried team-teaching - and that was even more disastrous for the learning situation. So when the powers-that-were came by and asked us how things were going and if there was anything we wanted - there was a chorus of "WALLS!" And finally, walls were put in and we all sighed with relief.

But one thing to which we soon became accustomed with the open-area was the almost constant stream of visitors through the back of our teaching area. We soon learned to ignore them and carry on with what we were doing. Often we didn't realize that people were there. The principal came through several times each day, and stopped when an interesting lesson was being taught. There was only feedback if he/she saw something especially good or the opposite(!). They soon knew how problem students reacted in the classroom and were able to give suggestions to improve things, they knew the teachers' strengths - and, yes, the flaws, too. They were able to see how much time the children were on task, how teachers handled transitions, and the continuity of lessons.

When a new principal came to the school, he/she was asked to continue the drop-in policy. We preferred this type of supervision than the usual arranged visit, where the lesson was perhaps not a typical one and the teacher was somewhat nervous. It is also unfair to be judged on only one lesson, rather than many. And.... it taught the principals, too. Many were from a high school or intermediate background and had little idea of what primary classes should be doing - and this made them knowledgeable and understanding of our problems.

If you are an observant teacher (or administrator), you will be able to get a clear idea of another teacher's work by short visits. Many teachers can walk into another classroom after school and get a picture of the way a colleague teaches, what is important to him/her and the organization/preparation time that the teacher thinks is important. A teacher who has a room that is untidy with the same piles of paper in the same places week after week is unlikely to be spending the necessary time on other aspects of teaching. The active literacy and math parts of the room give a good indication of the teaching style. Are there science, social studies and other areas of the curriculum shown in the décor? Is the library given importance? Can the teacher work at his/her desk? Are the students being trained to be organized by keeping their supplies in order?

There aren't many open-area classrooms now. We hated it, but it taught us some extremely useful things. First, always teach as if someone is watching. If someone is watching, teachers do better, more enthusiastic lessons. They rarely yell at a child or raise their voices in displeasure. Children are taught to move about the room with organization and purpose so as not to disturb others. Students soon learn to ignore other people in the classroom and lessons are not interrupted by visitors.

Try a simple experiment! Leave your classroom doors open, so people can look in as they go down the hall. Tell the principal that you are happy to see him/her in the classroom and would welcome visits daily, if possible. This takes some getting used to, of course, but it is likely that you will soon see the advantages in the paragraph above - of improved teaching, discipline practices and organization - unless, of course, you are already wonderful in these areas! (In that case, let everyone know by an open door policy.) It also tells others that you are open and are proud of what you do each day - and are happy to share it with others.

Creativity

There are conflicting views on what constitutes creativity. Teachers do not agree on the meaning of the word and what it entails. Some teachers feel that creativity is associated with different parts of the curriculum - writing or art. Some feel that students can be creative in all subject areas. Is creativity a talent that is instinctive or is it promoted from early childhood through experiences and the environment? Can it be taught or simply enhanced?

There is even confusion about what the word 'creativity' means. Is it imagination or problem-solving skills? Is it the ability to diverge from the common way of thinking? Is it the ability to think through a problem? Is it artistry in art or music? And who is the judge of creativity? What may be creative to one eye may not be so to another. Some people believe that small children are naturally creative, while others believe that there must be a base of knowledge in the skill to be truly creative. Certainly adult writers and artists must spend years learning their art and also have a talent to be creative in order to succeed.

Creative people usually have lots of ideas. They are able to brainstorm on a topic - they have a creative flow of ideas. Sorting these out and prioritizing is a different skill. These ideas are mostly dependent on prior learning and experience, the ability to imagine and the ability to express thoughts and feelings. Creativity is often thought of as originality, the ability to see things differently.

Through the curriculum:

There usually needs to be a framework of understanding and ability in order to produce creative thought and creative work.

In reading, the students will use creativity to predict, critique and extrapolate from the material they read. Without the ability to read fluently and with understanding, these are difficult to promote. Once the students are able to read, teachers can ask questions that have meaning to the children What may happen next? Why did this occur? Tell me about..... etc.

Writing is another skill that needs a firm foundation. Here's an example. Two Grade One classes are side by side. One teacher believes in the innate creativity of young children. She believes that writing rules stifle this creativity and she gets the children to let their ideas 'flow' on the paper, printing without lines. The other teacher insists on neat printing (on lines) and on the use of all the conventions of print. The students practice these daily. Which group of children will give the most imaginative writing? Yes, the second group! There is something about careless work that produces careless thought processes - that the work does not have value. Creativity in writing can be expanded, of course - encouraging imaginative thought and the use of vivid vocabulary to express thoughts.

In math the creative thinker can be encouraged see new ways of patterning numbers, to use shortcuts and alternate procedures. There is one right answer, but many ways to get to it. Problem solving skills involve visualization and the ability to think through a number story.

In art the students should be encouraged to use their own ideas, but strategies should be taught that the children can use as the basis of their creativity.

What can we do to promote creativity?

Children learn in a wide variety of ways, through listening, answering questions, following instructions, and practicing the basic skills. Creativity is enhanced when brainstorming, exploring ideas, designing and making, solving problems, using the imagination and expressing it in a variety of ways are added to the basic learning. Children should be encouraged to ask questions and think ahead.

Teach the basics well, and with this knowledge as the base, encourage creativity. Teachers should encourage the children to take risks, speculate, understand and respond in different ways. The quality of response is improved when teachers stimulate the conversations and there is discussion of thinking and feeling, allow lots of input from the children and ask challenging questions.

Classroom Aides

You are very lucky if you have a good classroom assistant! Classroom aides or paraprofessionals come in many forms..... there are teaching assistants, personal aides for special students or even volunteer parents. Some will have had extensive training and experience and will need little supervision. Some will be new to this and will need extensive assistance in order to be helpful. Some will be a very good help in your classroom and others may need a lot of direction. Some teachers are uncomfortable having another person in the classroom in the beginning, but become accustomed to it quickly.

All assistants in your classroom are under your supervision, because the children are under your supervision and anyone assisting them therefore must be, too. You are the 'boss'! Because it is your responsibility, you must direct and delegate them appropriately and assess their work. You are also the coach and trainer of inexperienced aides. There will be directives on the work that your aides are able to do. In most provinces, districts and schools they will not be allowed to actually teach children, except the one-on-one teaching that an aide to a special child can do and tutoring a child one-to-one. In other words, the assistant would not be allowed to teach a reading group unless there were special circumstances.

Proficient, well trained aides may:

- read to students - oral reading is a learned skill - make sure your aides are able to read with enthusiasm, good phrasing and expression.
- provide one-to-one instruction to help a student who is having difficulty.
- assist a group of students who are doing independent work.
- work with a special needs student, following the IEP that you and the other members of the school-based team have developed.
- work with a group of children who need help with skills. A well-trained aide may take a group of children in the Learning Assistance room, following the teacher's directions.
- assist handicapped students with personal needs and personal care, communication, etc.
- keeping records of the student(s) for whom the aide is helping.
- attend team meetings and help with program development when applicable.
- assist with the daily and weekly plans for a special student or small group of students, under the teacher's supervision.

Aides with less training, ability or experience may:

- take attendance, collect lunch money and other beginning of the day assistance.
- listen to students read - the aide should understand the cues that you use to help the children with difficult words.
- correct work to your specifications.
- photocopying, filing, running errands, collecting materials and equipment.
- prepare flash cards, exercise sheets, art supplies - all the 'cutty, cutty, paste, paste, print, print, print' jobs. Make sure the aide prints using the correct form.
- doing computer work for you and helping in the computer lab.
- taking the class down the hall to another classroom or the gym.
- assisting in the classroom during art lessons or classroom projects.

Remember, you are a team! Here are some strategies to promote this:

1. Meet regularly (at least once a week) with your aide in a private structured meeting.
2. Teacher aides need and deserve to feel a sense of belonging, purpose and pride in their jobs. Use praise when warranted and include them in making decisions.
3. Discuss and outline goals and responsibilities and your expectations of him/her.
4. Give constructive feedback during your face-to-face meetings. Be kind and professional - and truthful.
5. Be supportive and give assistance when necessary.
6. The aide should be made aware of your goals for students, your behaviour management system and his/her part in it, and why particular techniques are used with certain students.

Teaching Reading Successfully

How should we teach beginning reading? This question has concerned educators for hundreds of years. The written language of the early Greeks was simple and largely phonetic, so they were taught to read by first learning the letter sounds. Until the Middle Ages, written European languages were largely involved in copying texts. With the Reformation and the invention of the printing press, reading became available to the average person. In England, children were taught to read the Bible using letter sounds. The English language has roots in French, Latin, Greek and many other cultures; this adds many challenges to the teaching of reading. A letter or group of letters can have a number of different sounds. By the 19th century there was a push for 'whole word' reading to make the reading process easier for small children. Here began the 'Reading Wars'.

In the early 20th Century the beginning of the 'top down' methods could be seen. Children were expected to learn to read through play and exposure to books. Then, after the 1920's, the schools were teaching the 'look and say' method with the 'Dick and Jane' readers and other similar texts. By mid-century, it was found that close to 25% of the population was functionally illiterate. Now the reading wars began in earnest!

While most schools were still teaching the whole word methods, a number of serious phonics programs were developed. There was the I.T.A (Initial Teaching Alphabet), in which each phonetic component was a symbol and the resulting written words were barely recognizable. DISTAR and Orton-Gillingham gave intense systematic phonics instruction. In North America, teachers generally taught whatever reading system was available in the texts provided by their schools or districts. These were usually whole word texts with a smattering of phonics, but occasionally gave way to systematic phonetic texts with small amounts of whole word teaching.

In the 1980's, 'Whole Language' became the fashion. More than a reading method - it became a philosophy. It was child-centered rather than directed by the teacher; motivation instead of instruction. Most schools in North America embraced it completely. Phonics and sequential sight word basal readers were destroyed, and new teachers didn't have the skills to teach these methods even if they felt the need. 'Whole Language' was a form of sight reading, but without direct sequence or repetition. Children began by pretending to read and then memorizing pages of simple repetitive text, and it was assumed that they would 'emerge' to be readers. Suddenly, an increased number of children with learning disabilities and reading problems appeared, and the Reading Recovery program with specially trained teachers was brought in to close the gap. Teachers began adding phonics instruction into whole language, but the letter sounds were usually taught incidentally in context rather than systematically and explicitly.

Over the last few years teachers have been improving the instruction, but many are still using the literature methods. This is the stage at which we find ourselves across North America. Many teachers are confused by the conflicting methods and pushed constantly by the winds of change. Who is right? What should we be teaching and how should it be taught?

The Answer

The answer has been there all along! Every method that has been used to teach reading is correct! Every method is correct but not exclusive. Children are different and children learn in many different ways. If only one specific method is taught, there will always be some children who are unsuccessful in learning. Some children will learn to read easily no matter what method is used, but many children have a distinct learning style and will only learn well if taught that method. This is an obvious conclusion, isn't it? Phonics is the correct way to teach reading, and so is teaching a sight reading vocabulary and so is literature-based instruction.

If you ask primary teachers who teach through literature about their reading programs, they will say that they **do** teach phonics and sight words! All teachers will agree that these are important. But the lower children will not learn either phonics or sight reading skills well (or at all) unless they are taught specifically and sequentially. That is the key! For these children to learn well the phonics and sight words must be taught with a 'building block' approach. A single piece of new knowledge must be added to skills that have previously been mastered. When that piece of knowledge or skill has been mastered, only then is a new skill added.

A successful reading program that is effective for every child in the class will have these three strands:

Systematic Explicit Phonics - the bottom-up approach

Many children need to be taught a systematic sequential phonics program. Phonics provides the skills needed to decode unfamiliar words and to spell. The letter sounds and the blending of sounds is a necessary part of the reading process, as is the separation of sounds in spelling. Children with visual learning disabilities or visual processing problems especially need this method taught in order to learn to read. Beginning phonetic books should be used as decoding practice, not as 'literature'.

Explicit Sight Word Teaching - the direct approach

The direct approach is the specific teaching and repetition of sight words in a sequential program. This is especially necessary in the early part of the learning process. Many children require up to 50 repetitions of a word in order to remember it; this is especially necessary for children with auditory problems who find phonics difficult or impossible to learn. Every child needs to memorize the words, because, in order to read with fluency, children need to have an instantaneous recall of all the words. Many of the words in our language cannot be decoded phonetically and these words must be memorized.

Literature - the top-down approach

This method has many benefits necessary to the reading process. Children need to appreciate good literature and be exposed to well written trade books. They should be encouraged to read these books independently and discuss them. This method places greater emphasis on comprehension. Children need to read independently every day to practice the skills they have been taught and to listen to good literature being read to them each day. Guided reading lessons teach good reading habits.

Children learn to read in different ways. Many children are able to learn no matter what method is taught, but there are also many children who can only learn through their strongest learning modality. Some children are visual learners, some are auditory and some kinesthetic learners. The sight word and literature strands are the most useful for the visual learners. Auditory learners do best when taught a strong phonics program. Too often, however, we forget the kinesthetic learners, and there are more children who learn this way than is realized. A good reading program should include body movements, forming words by printing and other kinesthetic exercises throughout the three strands.

In Grade One and Grade Two the three strands need to be taught separately, but they will begin to overlap and converge as the children begin to read well. The phonics and sight word strands will greatly improve the reading in the literature strand. As each child is learning to read, the teacher can watch to see whether he or she is a visual learner who achieves the reading skills best through sight reading, an auditory learner who achieves the skills best through phonics, or a kinesthetic learner who requires physical action to learn to read. Your students with learning disabilities will especially benefit when you can teach toward their strongest modality. You will find some students who can only learn with one method, and it is interesting and rewarding to see these children bloom when you teach to their strengths.

It isn't easy! Teaching reading IS brain surgery.....

Classroom Organization

Most of us are collectors! We keep things in the classroom that we haven't used for years (if ever) just in case we might need them *some day*. This is perhaps the biggest problem in keeping our classroom space organized. *Some day* never comes, and all this 'stuff' prevents us from having a tidy, well organized space.

It is an unpleasant fact that visitors to the classroom make snap decisions of our capabilities by the organization of the classroom. In some cases, this judgment may not be accurate - but in most it follows that a teacher who takes time to organize the space and has an attractive neat classroom also takes time to have organized lessons and written records and plans. If the time is not taken to make the classroom an attractive place for the teacher and the children to spend these hours each day, usually the time has not been put into organizing lessons and planning well. The classroom organization is very important!

We also want to teach our children to work in an organized manner, to print neatly and to keep their supplies in good order. We must set an example.....

Here are some ideas to help you organize your space.

1. Sort through your materials. Throw out things that you haven't used in the last two years - or, if you can't bear to throw things in the trash, put them out for other teachers to look at and take if they wish. If no one takes the things - well - that proves they are junk! If you have materials for other grades than the one you are teaching, box up these things and take them home. Toys, puzzles or math manipulatives that aren't being used or are looking worn or have missing pieces can be tossed.
2. Organize your themes and units, and put these in plastic boxes or tubs with lids, labeled clearly. Some teachers have 10 of these labeled with the months - with charts, books, art ideas, themes, etc., all ready to use at the beginning of the month and then put away in the box at the end of this time. Then put these boxes out of sight! Boxes are never attractive. Put them in cupboards or a closet or up high in the children's coatroom. If these places don't work for you - take them home and bring them when needed.
3. I hereby challenge you to keep the top of your desk tidy and organized! It is a pleasure to work at a desk that is not cluttered with paper and 'stuff'. Put a large piece of coloured tag to define your work-space, and have only your daily plans and perhaps a computer to one side. Put the necessary pens and marking pencils into an attractive container. Then a small plant or some flowers will complete the space. Why should we expect the children to keep their desks clean and tidy if we can't?
4. In your desk filing drawer, have files that are for your personal paperwork. Forms for discipline and accident reports, etc., staff and committee meetings, substitute ideas, letters and correspondence from parents, newsletter copies, etc.
5. Have a shallow plastic container marked 'To File'. Pop things that need to be filed into it when you are in a hurry, and clean it out often so you can put your hand on things that you need quickly and easily. Don't let it build up to where you don't want to look at it!
6. Have a computer calendar file, a desk calendar, appointment book or a calendar in your plan book where you put important dates. Keep a record of appointments past so you can refer to them.
7. Buy a plastic file box and make files for each day of the week. Put in photocopied materials, lesson plans and worksheets, books, tests, etc. If you have the week planned ahead, life is so much easier!
8. Put as much as possible on the computer. Daily plans can be done quickly onto a template. They are easily changed this way, as we often don't do exactly what we had planned. Keep all the used plans. Monthly and yearly plans can be on the computer, too, and easily changed or modified from one year to another. Marks can be put onto databases and anecdotal notes into files for each student.
9. The students should have places to put completed work so that the different sheets or exercise books are piled neatly.

10. Take home papers can be in student files in a special filing cabinet or put into pocket folders. If your kids are given a student number in alphabetical order and these are put on all papers in the top corner, the students can file these easily for you.
11. Have containers for student supplies that are neat and attractive.
12. Organize the library books so the children can find books at their level and also find non-fiction books on subjects that interest them. You may have sections for different authors or genres of literature. However you organize the books, make sure they look neat and attractive. Have some books on a ledge or railing for the students to see to encourage reading.
13. Keep your walls looking attractive! Change bulletin boards often. Staple items up neatly - haphazard papers or art work makes your room look really messy. Don't over-do the decorations - make sure they are practical. If you have ADHD kiddies keep your classroom attractive but spare as distractions may make the behaviours worse.
14. Student desks and tables move about and look untidy. You can bring them back to the proper spot by putting a small sticker or piece of masking tape on the floor or carpet to show where two feet should be. Tables together can have the joining legs strapped or tied together so the tables move as one unit.
15. Train the students to clean up after themselves. At the end of each period, spend thirty seconds tidying up - picking up items from the floor, putting materials back where they belong, organizing desks, books and supplies. At the end of the day have the children do all the cleaning possible so the classroom is left in perfect shape.
15. Train yourself to spend perhaps ten minutes after school each day tidying, too. File things, put papers where they belong, make sure your desk top is cleaned off, and everything looks nice.

It is a pleasure to have a clean tidy workplace. You are responsible for providing an attractive place for yourself and your children to spend a large part of your day. In a neat environment the students will be more peaceful, quieter and happier - and that is definitely worth some time and effort!



Homework

Homework is often a touchy subject with teachers and parents. As a teacher, we feel that extra practice will help our children perform better. As a parent (grandparent, in my case) it becomes a chore - not always pleasant.

Back in the 'olden days' when I was teaching, work was not allowed to be sent home as a regular thing in Grade One and Two. It was felt that children should be out playing and having family time in the evening - and there is certainly validity in that opinion. Grade Threes could be assigned a short amount, and the time increased through the grades above that.

The parents of my grandchildren are professionals at their day jobs and devoted to their children. But they come home tired and often stressed at 5:00 p.m., and then make dinner, tidy up, make lunches, and finally have about an hour to spend with the children before bedtime. They like this time to be a pleasure and they do read with the kids. Luckily for this family, I have the children do their written homework after school before the parents come home. The Grade Five boy usually has an hour or more and the Grade Two girl does some math or spelling. Most parents don't have this luxury.

I see how tiring school is for the kids - they frequently 'tune out' while doing homework and I can't blame them. They have put in a long day without a lot of time for active play, sitting in one place and trying to do their best. It is work for them, just as our jobs are also work.

I can certainly understand the friction in many families over homework. The children are tired and the parents are tired - and this is a recipe for arguments and resistance. Instead of a bonding experience - it is just the opposite.

I hear teachers on-line saying that the parents are not pulling their weight or helping their children, and the parents thinking that the teachers are hired to do the teaching of the kids and being annoyed at the work going home. And both are right, although I am basically inclined to side with the parents on this. And what teacher wants or needs more marking to do?

So what to do? Should your primary children have homework? Does it actually help the child's progress? Unless it is a pleasant time for the child - homework may actually cause harm rather than help with the child's learning.

Instead of sending home work, simply have your students read every night - preferably aloud to an adult. If the child is an excellent reader, he/she can read before bed by him/herself - although reading aloud has many benefits. The student will not be able to skip words that he doesn't know, and can be helped on these by the adult. The story can be discussed, too, and made more interesting by the sharing.

Talk to the parents about the ways to make reading more interesting. They can take turns reading with the child or read together at the same time. They can talk about the plot and the characters, and how the story relates to things with which the child is familiar. They should read every night - but as all parents know, that is not likely possible. Strive for five days in the week.

Have the parents fill out a reading log. Have a sheet for the week with spaces for the date, the book title, the number of pages read and remarks by the parent. Send it home on the same day each week - Monday, for example - and insist that the students bring this back filled out on the following Monday.

You could have a class chart, adding the total of minutes read for each child in a bar graph, or simply add up all the minutes each week to make a grand total. Try to beat that total next week!

In Grade Two and Three a skill can be added. Have the children pick an interesting or difficult word from the reading each day and write it on the log. Talk about these with the class on the following week. If you do Accelerated Reading (AR), give the children ample opportunities to do the testing as soon as a book is completed. Talk about the books read and have the students share the ones that they really enjoyed, so others will be encouraged to try them, too.

Homework can be valuable and stress-free!

Homework

The ideas about homework changed at about the same time as 'whole language' became popular. Before then, there was little homework assigned in the primary grades - in fact, B.C. teachers were not allowed to assign homework until Grade Three. So what happened?

Homework became an extension of responsibility. Parents became partially responsible for the education of their children. On list-serves and on-line chat-boards teachers are often heard complaining that it is impossible to teach the child because the parents are not pulling their weight. This is regrettable. Of course we would wish that all parents would or could help the child, but the transference of responsibility is not a good thing.

It is my opinion that teachers should try to develop a mindset that the child's education ends at the classroom door. We would hope, of course, that it doesn't - but in many cases that is really what happens. The teacher should be taking the full responsibility for the child's education. What the child learns or doesn't learn is up to the teacher. Then, when a child is having problems, the teacher cannot blame others and must do something to help the problem in the classroom.

There are many reasons why homework is not good for the child. Many children are in after-school care and don't see the parents until dinner time. They eat a quick meal and then the tired parents want to relax and have fun with their children. There is not much time for fun before bedtime. Homework can become a hated ritual after dinner, when both the parents and children are tired and cross. It becomes an unpleasant time, as the parents are often not patient or positive. Most children will dislike this time and dislike the reading or math that is being done. Days can go by without happy family fun, and this is tragic. The family and the children would be much further ahead if they all went out to play together. Quality time with parents is often missing.

We try to encourage creativity and imagination, yet most children today spend very little time in imaginative play. They watch TV, play video games and play with toys that do not encourage imagination. Homework takes more time away from creative play.

Children don't get enough exercise. They often do not walk to school and there isn't the neighbourhood play that we knew as children. Homework keeps the child sedentary, too.

Parents are not teachers. They do not understand the way we teach skills in the primary grades. Even the well-educated parents are often at a loss as to how to teach simple skills. They will not understand why the child may have difficulty with skills that they think are very simple, and the reaction to this may be either the child's incompetence or the teacher's incompetence - this is not good for the child or you!

So what can we do? It really is a good thing if the child can have some extra practice at home - but we must assume that it isn't being done and take full responsibility for every child's education. Always take this responsibility, and do whatever is necessary to give each child the teaching and practice he/she needs. That is our job!

When you do send books home for the child to read, make sure that the child can already read it and the book is at his/her independent reading level. Then the child can read to the parent and 'show off' the skill. This way both the parents and child will enjoy the experience. Books and material that are too difficult will cause unnecessary friction at home. Tell the parents that the work at home must be fun. If it isn't, then it isn't worth the effort.

Sometimes it is a good idea to send homework of a different kind. Teach the children to play simple board games or card games, and send them home to be played as a family. Ask the children to get some exercise - do daily runs at school and ask the families to run together in the early evening. Do family projects. Make homework fun, positive and pleasant for both children and families, and you will be helping to further the child's love of learning.

Time Management

Some teachers seem to be naturally efficient and able to handle their time, both with the students and in preparation, with ease. Other teachers have to work at time management and improve it gradually over the years. Time management is very important. Our time is limited with the students so every minute counts - and poor organization and management of preparation time has many teachers working many hours each week that are really not necessary.

How many minutes each day do your students receive instructional time? To see how your students fare, think about one student at the top of your class, one in the middle and one of your lowest students. Find the number of instructional minutes each student gets on a normal day. When you do whole-class instruction, every involved child can count this as instructional time. Group time and individual instruction can be counted - but not the time when the child is doing independent work, centres or other activities, supervised but not being instructed. Some hands-on math activities can be counted as instruction if the teacher is actively involved in the process. Add up the minutes in the day when each child is receiving instruction. What percentage of the day are the children being instructed?

*Then see how much **individual** instruction each child is receiving, for a different result. For whole class instruction, divide the minutes of your lesson by the number of students in your class. If you teach a whole class math lesson for 20 minutes and there are 20 children in your class, each child gets one minute. If you teach a group of 5 children for 30 minutes, each student gets 6 minutes of individual instruction. Do this throughout the day and see how many minutes each of the children get in individual instruction. How does each compare to the number of minutes in the day divided by the number of students in the class? There are some times of the day that no child will be getting instruction. Which child gets the most minutes? Which child needs more minutes of your instructional time? You may be surprised at the results. It is interesting to think that if there are 300 minutes in the school day and 20 children in your class - if it were divided evenly each child would receive only 15 minutes time!*

Obviously, every minute you can save gives you more instructional time. Here are a few ideas to save a few precious minutes!

Calling the roll is only instructional in kindergarten, where you can show the names for recognition. Otherwise, this minute can be saved. You can have the children move their names to a different place when they come in, or if the children go to their desks simply look for absent ones.

The children can have a book at their independent reading level in their desks and read while you do the morning house-keeping tasks.

Have everything you need for each lesson well prepared and at hand so instructional time is not lost during the lesson.

Have strategies for the times the children are moving around the classroom or lining up to go outdoors. If the students know exactly what they are to do in these transitions, things progress more quickly and time is saved. Using a signal is a quick way to tell the students to clean-up - turning the lights out or playing music or ringing chimes. You can play jazzy music - teaching the children what to do when they hear it - tidy, line-up, put things away or get certain things out. Practice the transitions until the children know your expectations, and then monitor them as they make these.

Giving each child a number that corresponds to your mark book number is a time saver. Train the students to put their numbers in the top right hand corner of each paper they do. When you put the papers in order you can immediately see which papers are missing and the marks can be put in the mark register much more quickly.

Spend plenty of time to model the procedures that you want your children to follow - in classroom movement, assignments, centres, etc. Some time spent at the beginning so every child understands thoroughly is really a time saver after that.

Managing Your Time and Stress

Teaching in the primary grades is very stressful. It is hard work! Many teachers develop stress problems, especially in the winter months. Depression is common, and because we need to 'perform' every day, teaching becomes even more difficult.

I can tell you what to do, but as a teacher I know that we don't always do what is the best for us. It is easy to give suggestions, but difficult to follow them. If you are feeling stressed, over-worked and under-appreciated, try as many of these suggestions as you can.



Look after yourself first. If you are not in top form you will not be able to care for others as well as you would like.

- Watch your health, physical and mental. Go to the doctor when you feel symptoms that are not usual. Anxiety, tiredness, lack of energy, lack of sleep or wanting to sleep all the time, irritation and physical aches and pains may be symptoms of something else and may be treated by your physician.

- Give yourself some time alone each day. Even 15 minutes of quiet peaceful relaxation can re-charge your batteries. Read a book, have a bath or simply lie down and rest.

- Pamper yourself occasionally. Go to a spa with friends, go out for dinner or buy yourself something for a treat.

Have your priorities straight. What are the important things in your life?

- Your own children should come first. Every time you are not there for your own kids you will regret it later. Your children should always come before the children you teach.

- Your husband/wife should also have priority over your job. Only rarely should it be necessary to bring your job into your family time (we do have report card times and parent evenings - and these can't be helped). Never short-change the people you love best.

Practice time-management techniques. I have heard teachers say that they can't do their job without staying until 6:00 p.m. each day and then bringing work home to do. Try these:

- Set limits on your at-school hours. If you would like to be home at 4:30, then pace your day to achieve that and leave the school in time.

- Mark as much of the work as possible in class with the students. It is much more valuable for them. Don't be afraid to dump some work in that circular file rather than agonizing over it.

- Plan a week in advance - on the computer, if possible. You can easily 'cut-and-paste' rather than writing out everything.

- Follow programs in each subject that have been set out for you. That way you don't have the daily preparation and someone else has done all the work! Often these teach the children better, too, as they are usually more sequential.

- Have the children spend ten minutes before school ends to tidy things and then you can spend another ten minutes to organize the classroom.

Take care of yourself! Your teaching will be better and your family will be happier.

Reading Research

Research into the best practices for teaching reading seem to all agree - systematic and explicit phonics seems to produce the best readers. Some researchers add phonemic awareness in the early stages, and literature addition in order to increase comprehension skills and enjoyment.

But read more carefully! What were the control groups doing? In all the research I can find, this is vague. The classrooms that were not doing systematic phonics instruction in the research group seem to be doing 'other things' - whole language or vague literature lessons, not sequential or explicit. Here is where the research is flawed.

It is my opinion that it is often the 'sequential and explicit' that produces better readers, rather than the phonics programs used in the research. As most research is used to come to a pre-determined conclusion, what the control groups are doing is of prime importance! Now here is a question I have never seen answered - what if the control group was doing a specific and sequential sight word program, such as the old Ginn basals (or the *Successful Sight Reading* program)?

Sight word programs went out of favour in the 1980's, and many teachers have forgotten that they worked very well! They were not boring or repetitive except in the early pre-primers, and most children learned to read fluently. Yes, they did lack decoding skills and students who were poor visual learners had difficulty, but children could read some words from the first day of school and were only reading material at their independent reading level and this was psychologically encouraging.

So what would happen if sequential phonics and sequential sight reading went head-to-head? I do not know which would win! Both explicit phonics programs and sequential sight word programs have good points and detriments, and both work very well to produce good readers.

There are a number of good phonics programs available. *Open Court* and *Reading Mastery* with 'Direct Instruction' are two of the most popular, and the *Successful Phonics* program works well, too. Good phonics training is wonderful and does produce good readers - students who eventually can decode automatically and attack unfamiliar vocabulary - but it has been my experience that there are always some students in every classroom who do not learn well through phonics. These children have auditory difficulties and do not process the sounds accurately and this makes phonics difficult. Some children find the blending process difficult, too, so when phonics is the central or only program taught, they are very slow to actually read words and their success will be limited by the reading philosophy.

A sequential sight word program teaches most children to read well. Most children are visual learners, but there are always a few students in every classroom who are not visual learners and who do not learn sight words easily. Some students do not learn to decode without the direct instruction in phonics, so these sight readers are limited by the reading program.

So where does this leave the research into reading practices? Hundreds of researchers have spent years trying to discover the 'best practices', but it is my opinion that all of the findings are flawed. I believe that sequential phonics with direct instruction is excellent, and sight word programs that teach sequentially are also excellent. One alone does not teach everyone, but if both are taught all children in the class will learn to read very well. But these do not teach the pleasure in reading and the strategies that students can use in real literature - so this is needed, too!

Teachers who can teach all three methods will find that they are teaching to the needs of every child in the class - from the brightest light to the most challenged. There is no need for Learning Assistance or Reading Recovery. The children are all getting the lessons they need in the classroom. The teacher may find that help is needed to hear children read daily, but this can be done by aides or parent volunteers.

Time is a problem. Try teaching sequential phonics for approximately 30 minutes to the whole class. Teach sight words and sight reading to homogeneous groups for 1 hour. Spend at least an hour doing literature - reading to the students and doing whole class guided reading lessons with trade books. It can be done, and your students will shine.

Learning Modalities

Everyone learns differently! We learn through a combination of the visual, auditory and kinesthetic senses. Some people are strong in all the modalities, but most of us are stronger in one and weaker in the others. Children, too, learn in different ways and it is important that we understand how individual children learn.

Children who are auditory learners may hum or talk to themselves frequently. They usually can sing well. They like poems, and learn best when you give them verbal instructions. The auditory learner likes listening to music and stories, and can give answers more easily by talking than by writing. Because sound variations are obvious to them, they do well if they are taught an explicit sequential phonics program.

Children who are visual learners will enjoy books and pictures. They notice that you have a loose or missing button. They remember how things look and can describe them in detail. They particularly enjoy movies and may be concerned about both their personal appearance and the appearance of their written or artistic work. Children who are visual learners can remember whole words by sight and do well if taught a sequential sight word program. Bright visual learners will also do well using the literature approach to teaching reading.

Children who are kinesthetic learners like to feel or touch everything they walk past or stand near. They nudge friends, take gadgets apart, and love to play with clay, dance, and work on art projects. These children may be particularly good at sports, and can spend all day on the monkey bars, parallel bars, and swings on the playground. These children learn by using whole-body motions, hand actions and printing.

Most children learn through a combination of all the senses. 50% of children across the population will be capable in all modalities, generally with a strength in visual learning. These children learn well no matter what reading program the teacher uses! They do well if taught using literature, if taught a sight word or a phonics program.

It has been found that 10 to 15% of children have a severe weakness in one (or two) modalities. If one of the modalities is very weak, we say that the child has a learning disability - either visual, auditory or kinesthetic. These children will compensate by also having one strong modality.

This leaves 35 to 40% of children who are generally in the lower half of the school population. They will usually have one strength, with the other two modalities weaker. The reading programs you teach really matter to these children and to the children with learning disabilities.

What impact does visual teaching have on a student whose primary learning modality is kinesthetic? Very little! What happens if we teach a visual sight word reading program to a child who is a strong auditory learner? The child will have lots of problems and will not learn well. What if we teach only phonics to children who are very weak in the auditory modality? These children will have great difficulties.

Discovering Modalities

Careful observation can tell you which students may be having trouble learning in a certain modality and what their strengths may be.

Students who have difficulty with visual learning may confuse letters or words that look similar. They may reverse or invert letters. They may have b/d reversal problems and have difficulty with words that look alike. The student will also have trouble remembering sight words, and have to see a word up to 50 or more times before they remember it. Children with a visual strength will remember whole words easily.

Students who have difficulty with auditory learning will perform poorly to spoken directions. They may have articulation difficulties and/or poor spoken vocabulary. The students may not be able to recognize rhyming words easily or distinguish between long and short vowel sounds or between the short 'i' and 'e' sounds. They may be unable to hum a simple melody on key. Children with an auditory strength will remember sounds and do well when taught blending techniques.

Children with kinesthetic or motor difficulties will have a hard time imitating gestures. They're likely to have poor balance and co-ordination. They usually do poorly with pencil-paper tasks. They have trouble staying within lines when colouring, and they can't keep time to music while marching or skipping. Children with a kinesthetic strength will remember words if the learning has a fine or gross motor motion attached to it. They print neatly and draw well.

Teaching to the Modalities

Most teachers are teaching guided reading lessons from trade books. The books are levelled so there is some sequence and repetition, but this is not enough for your lower students, especially if you teach whole class lessons. Your lower students, especially in Grade One, need lessons that are sequential and specific. By that I mean that today's lesson reviews yesterday's lesson and past skills and continues to add new things in a specific order.

If you think that you have children who have a strength visually, then use old 'readers' or other programs that teach sight words in a specific order. These children need to see a word many times before it becomes automatic. If you have students who have auditory strength, teach a sequential phonics program where the sounds and blending is mastered before continuing to add new skills. Blend words daily until this becomes automatic, too. Students who are kinesthetic learners need lots of body and hand work - printing and movement - to learn well.



Reading in Kindergarten

Why Not?

Many of your children will be ready to learn to read at this time in Kindergarten. You will have students who would be in Grade One if they were a few months older and who just missed the cut-off dates for registration. You will have some very bright lights, too, who are really ready to learn to read no matter the age.

Of course you will also have students who are immature and who do not yet know the letters or the concepts of print. In days past, it was not considered developmentally appropriate to teach reading to children who were 'not ready'. This has been proved to be inaccurate. There is something in the learning of words, the remembering and understanding of the abstract that improves the readiness much more quickly by actually reading than by trying to teach readiness, and in some studies has even raised the IQ of students who were taught to read early. What better way to learn letters than to make them useful? The best way to teach the concepts of print is to learn to read basic words, and read short sentences and very simple books.

How to Teach Reading in K

As in Grade One, students should be taught to read three ways. The difference is in the specificity of the lessons. In Kindergarten the teacher will go slowly with the concepts, with lots of hands-on exercises and oral practice.

1. The children should have guided reading lessons with simple, interesting books that they can 'read' themselves by looking at the pictures or memorization after the teacher has read it through with the students. They should be encouraged to point to each word as they read to solidify the concepts of print and the directional skills. This helps the less mature children to understand the concepts of words and spacing.
2. The children should be taught the letter sounds and beginning blending. Give them practice in blending simple words. The children will begin to see the letters and sounds in the words and understand that these help them read unknown words in the books. The letters need to be specifically taught, one at a time, and after teaching the sounds and letters should be reviewed daily. If this review is not done some children will not retain the knowledge. Teach blending with hand motions - saying each letter sound and then sliding the sounds together to make the word. Be careful that the letter sounds are made without the 'uh' on the end - it is almost impossible to blend buh /a/ tuh.
3. The students should be sequentially taught a sight vocabulary. You may only teach perhaps 20 to 40 words in Kindergarten, but these are the building blocks to beginning reading. Words can be taught with lots of hands-on exercises and motions. Kinesthetic exercises really help the memory. For example, when teaching the word 'red', take a word card around the classroom touching red things and then the word each time. For the word 'you', say and touch the word and point to another person. Read little books that use only the words that you have taught.

You will find that your brighter children will pick up these concepts and may go on to learn more on their own. The less mature students may not remember all the things that you teach, but enough of the basic concepts will be there to considerably increase the chances for success in Grade One - and this is the goal. Try to have simple books and reading materials that may go home - after the child has been successful with these at school. Don't send home reading work that is too difficult for the child.

Teaching Gifted Children

"A truly gifted child is never bored...."

It is my opinion (for what it is worth) that bright children do not understand the word 'bored' unless taught it by adults..... Perhaps it is because of my age. In MY day children did not have TV, video games, or toys that come completed so imagination is not required. Children made the best with what they had, and I remember making princesses out of flowers, inventing stories with paper dolls and building sand castles. We had to be self-motivated. Now many children are lost if they are not being entertained.

Many children use the word 'bored' when they don't want to do something. They soon learn that they get a reaction from adults when they use this word, and an adult will step in to change the activity or to entertain them. In school, children may say they are bored with printing, for example, because they don't want to do the work - and then the parents come to you and complain about the poor child not being challenged. Often parents will say that a child is bored as an excuse for everything from unacceptable behaviour to poor work. "He's just bored!" It doesn't take long for their kids to catch on and use that excuse, too. And, life for all of us does contain many 'boring' things. How many hours of your day are spent house cleaning, mowing the lawn, dusting furniture, cleaning the bathroom - or marking papers, or doing report cards? Complaining about the tasks being boring will not make them go away!

I have taught a number of gifted children. A student may be reading at the Grade Three level at Christmas in Grade One, but not be ahead of other bright kids in phonics, printing, spelling or writing. When they are given work to do at the Grade Three level, they will not usually be very successful because there are holes in the learning. Almost all gifted children will be quite happy doing the work that the rest of the class are doing - they will do it quickly and well and then can go on to read a book or do other things that are more challenging. Most really need the lessons that the other children are having, just to fill those holes, but the learning can be much quicker than that of average children. The problem with gifted children in the regular classroom is that sometimes the pace of learning is not fast enough for them and this can cause distractions and disruptions.

Gifted children may not be socially, emotionally or physically ahead of their peers. It is important to treat them at their chronological age. This is the primary reason why accelerating them to a higher grade is often a poor idea. They may be able to handle the scholastics, but once promoted may feel inferior to their older classmates in these other ways. This is especially difficult as they become teenagers.

Many gifted children think that getting extra, more difficult work is not 'fair'. It almost feels like a punishment! Sometimes these children will not want to be thought of as special because they don't like to have to work harder than the others, and if they are sent to work with older kids they no longer feel smart as they will have problems with parts of the assignments that the older children find easy.

So, what can you do for these children that will keep them progressing? First, have lots of interesting books at their level. If a child is interested in space or pirates, provide fiction and non-fiction books that are challenging but suitable for the level. Teach them to play chess, sudoku or other games that require higher level thinking skills. Have a reading group of your higher children so that the lessons are paced faster than your whole class lessons.

Some of your children may have high IQs and not be performing at that level. You can sometimes challenge these children by asking higher level thinking questions about the books they read and science and social studies. Critical, creative problem-solving, prediction, sequencing, word study, math reasoning - all help to challenge these students, and all your children, to develop. Research and web-searches are fun for your gifted children. Computer games that challenge them are very useful. They often do well when they are able to take part in science fairs and public speaking contests. Writing and publishing little books on the computer is another way to encourage these kiddies.

Remember their age, and encourage them in age-appropriate ways that make them feel successful and interested in the work.

Having Fun!

Don't lose the fun in your classroom. There are so many expectations on our students and ourselves that sometimes we can forget to enjoy ourselves. Many great activities can be integrated into our lessons, too. Here are some good ideas for fun in the classroom - and ways to bring in the arts, as well.

Music

Children are naturally drawn to music. They love to sing and to listen to music. You should sing every day in your classroom. If you can't carry a tune in a bucket, use recorded music and sing along. There are many internet sites where you can find the words and the music, and many CDs or videos of great children's songs.

Repeat a song every day until the children are very familiar with all the words and the tune, and then review often. You will know that you are succeeding when your students ask to sing, and when you hear them humming the tunes to themselves or singing in small groups just for enjoyment. Singing can be integrated with your subjects - teach songs that go with your themes or learning outcomes. Singing is also a great break between work periods.

Have a classroom chart with the titles of all the songs that the class have learned. This can be referred to when reviewing all the favourites. The students can also have a collection of the words to songs taught - print out the words on a sheet and photocopy to go into the children's books as you would for poems.

Your students will likely be poor at singing at first, unless they have done this in previous years. Like all things, they will improve with practice. The more they sing, the more on-key they will become and the more confidence they will acquire. Good singers will do well at a school concert, and the children will love to sing while traveling on field trips, etc.

Listening is the other part of a music program. Good music can be put on softly when the students are doing independent work, or when drawing or centers - any quiet time. Some teachers put on a certain type of music for several weeks - a classical composer, jazz, folk music, etc. Discuss what they are hearing, the composer and the meaning of the music. Soon they will be comparing the different types of music and having preferences for different composers. What a great educational opportunity and fun, too!

Use music for mood. Quick music for cleanup time, soft quiet music for reading or individual written work, a certain piece of music to tell the students to clean up or come to the circle. Some students with learning, emotional or behavioural disabilities cope much better with soft music playing.

Physical Education

P.E. should always be fun for every child. We often think of P.E. as gym activities - but many physical activities can be done in the classroom.

Music and physical exercise can often be coordinated. If you don't have gym time every day, you can do 'fitness to music' in the classroom, an empty classroom or even outdoors. Put on jazzy music and lead the students with aerobic exercises. Again, they will be able to follow better and better as they practice, and the better they get at the exercises the more they will enjoy it.

Physical exercise can be the breaks between work periods. Just having the students stand beside their desks and do stretching, reaching and jumping exercises is valuable.

Do musical action songs - the most obvious is 'Head and Shoulders'. Do these slowly at first until every child is able to follow and then speed it up.

There are a few 'don'ts' with physical exercise. Some children are not as physically capable and hate exercise where they feel singled out and subject to peer pressure. Picking teams can be done randomly - never have the students choose teams. Keep P.E. lessons light and pleasant for everyone.

Art

Do art lessons several times each week. Children love to do art and crafts - and all efforts should be celebrated. Especially in the early grades, do lots of art projects where there is a 'level playing field', where there is no advantage for children who have good fine motor skills. Finger-painting, colour mixing, simple crafts where the students follow directions are good.

Many teachers forget that many students need to be taught how to do drawing, colouring or painting. Why would art be different than other subjects? Most children need to be taught how to read, write, do math - and most also need to be taught how to draw simple objects, how to colour effectively and paint well. This does not hamper creativity any more than teaching children the writing conventions hampers writing creativity. All artists take lessons to learn the basic procedures. Children will be much happier with their finished art if there are lessons and guidelines that help them produce a better product.

Children have fun doing crafts as well. Doing art projects that go with the seasons and holidays will be a pleasure in your classroom, and make great room decorations, too.

Games

Children love to play games in the classroom, as long as they have a 'level playing field' with this, as well. Games should be chosen that do not place your slower students or children with other disabilities at a disadvantage. Shy students should not feel nervous in games and a shy or slower child should not have to perform in front of the group or be responsible for a team's success. If a child is nervous or upset, the game is no longer fun.

Games such as 'Sparkle' are great - the child who is 'out' is random so all children have an equal chance of winning. Play math games in pairs or small groups as long as the children in the group have similar skills or the game does not necessarily favour the smartest child. Snakes and Ladders or simple card games are good as the outcome is left to chance.

Teach outdoor games that the children can play at recess. Teach the rules and practice playing hopscotch and marbles. Teach the children to skip and also teach skipping rhymes. Did you do special ball or other games when you were a child? Share them with your children.

Parties and Celebrations

These are the times that children remember! Parties and celebrations do not have to be great productions - simple can be just as much fun. These can be opportunities for learning, too - a pumpkin day where there are lots of math and science and writing as part of the celebration, 100 Day with all the math activities, egg day, writing on Valentine's Day, etc.

Field Trips

Get out of the classroom to teach lessons! Your students will have great fun doing a 5 Senses lesson outdoors - feeling tree bark, smelling flowers, listening to bees humming, etc. Field trips can be well-planned trips to a distant attraction or a simple lesson in the nearby park or even on the playground.

Laugh a Lot

A day without a good hearty laugh is a day lost! Laughter is good for the health, both physical and mental. Laugh with your children often - tell jokes, read funny stories, and always look for the ridiculous.

Success

Success is the most fun we can have! Teach the children very well so that they experience success every day - true success that is measurable. Have them print neatly, keep things tidy, and work efficiently. Keep the classroom pleasantly quiet. All these things will give pleasure to both you and the children.

Worksheets

The use of worksheets is controversial. Should you use lots of them to practice the skills taught? Should you try to phase them out? Are they useful or not? Some principals are against them - could it be because so many worksheets are photocopied and cost money? Here are some pros and cons of doing worksheets.

Here are some problems with worksheets:

- Often your bright kids have the sheet done before all of them are handed out, and the slow kids may have too much difficulty and take forever to finish it.
- The sheet may not have much to do with the concept you are teaching and not really improve the learning.
- Sometimes worksheets are used as busy work.
- Some worksheets have very little actual work for the students to do and so is a waste of photocopying.
- There are always corrections - and we have to keep track of who has completed them.
- Students' printing or writing on worksheets is often very untidy.
- They do use a lot of paper - and photocopying fees.

Here's how we can make worksheets valuable:

- A rule of thumb - it should take at least as long for an average child to complete the sheet as it does for the teacher to make it (or find it) and photocopy it and pass it out.
- Worksheets should be practice for the concepts taught and learned in the previous lesson.
- They should have a defined purpose.
- Worksheets that re-enforce reading and phonics skills can be made much more useful by having the students read them over independently when completed, and then reading them to another student and then in a group. This will make the sheet quite valuable.
- With math sheets, the students can go in small groups to explain to each other the concepts they have used on the paper.
- Have the students print sentences out in full, rather than fill in the blanks on worksheets. Printing practice is very valuable as we want our students to print fluently. Have interlined spaces so the printing is neat.

When not to use worksheets:

- Do not use worksheets if the same work can be done in an exercise book. Children do much better work in exercise books - neater, more careful, and with more thought. Perhaps the students believe that paper sheets do not have the importance.
- Don't use them for busy work. Let the students read a book if you need them quiet and busy.

Why worksheets can be valuable:

- Our students should become familiar with a wide variety of questioning and a variety of formats. If you want to give tests the students will do much better if the format is familiar.
- Good worksheets give the children necessary practice in the basic skills.
- Worksheets can go home to be completed.

Classroom Impressions

There is much written about office environments and how they can be made more employee friendly and efficient. There is a correlation between office efficiency and increased production. The physical office has been shown to affect stress levels, employee satisfaction and health.

Our classrooms are much more important than a business office. Not only ourselves, but the children spend a large part of their day in this space. This is our 'home away from home'. This environment is extremely important to everyone who is there. It either promotes calmness or busyness, pleasure or irritation, peace or stress, interest or boredom.

What do classrooms say about the teacher and the students? Try walking into other classrooms in your school. What do these rooms tell you? Would you like to spend the day in any of them? Do any of the rooms make you feel welcome and pleased to be there? Can you tell why? How does a room that is quite bare make you feel? How does a messy room make you feel? Can you tell things about the teachers by looking around the classrooms? Can you tell how the children are being taught? Can you see what the teacher values? Are there things that show the teacher's philosophy of teaching literacy? Are there things in the classroom that tell about the children personally? If you were a principal or supervisor walking into these rooms, can you tell the quality of the teaching? If you were told that you would have to spend five hours each day in one of these rooms, which would you choose? Why did you choose it?

Once you have done that, walk into your own classroom as if it were strange to you. Answer all the questions above. Would you like to spend five or six hours of your day here? How does your room make you feel? Do you feel guilty about untidy spots? Are you pleased with the bulletin boards? Are the charts and printed work showing care? What is the room telling others about you?

It may be unfair, but the organization that shows in your physical classroom indicates to visitors your level of organization in your teaching. If the room is messy, it will be assumed that the lessons are not well planned, the teaching will be haphazard, that marking won't be done well, that the disorganization flows into every part of the day. If your teacher's desk is piled high, the boards haven't been properly cleaned, there are paper piles on the floor, the desks are every-which-way, the books are messy - what are they unconsciously telling your guests and your students?

We talk a lot about modeling the behaviours and procedures with our children so that they will fully understand what to do. If we want them to read fluently, we model reading. If we want them to treat others with kindness, we model this. If we want them to print neatly - we must set a good example. If your desk is messy, you can't expect that the children's desks will be neat. If you model that you don't care about some things, the students won't care either.

Because of the time we and our children spend in the classroom, do your best to make it a wonderful place. Keep the space tidy and well organized. Put 'junky' things away in cupboards. Keep the desks and table tops bare as much as possible. Make the library books look enticing so the children will be encouraged to read. Make sure your bulletin boards are attractive, seasonal, tidy and show the best examples of the children's work. Have your charts, poems, word cards neatly displayed and relevant.

Direct the children to clean up after themselves after each activity. It only takes 20 or 30 seconds. At the end of each day have a thorough cleanup - check the students' desks, the floor, the shelves and put everything away. Then put the desks and tables in neat order, too. Then take five or ten minutes after the children have gone to dash around and tidy all those spots that the children have missed. Make sure the room is lovely for the children to enter tomorrow morning.

It isn't a lot of work to do all this. It is a matter of attitude and of caring enough to want an attractive place for the children to learn. It is important! If your room needs work, do one piece of furniture or one cupboard or one bulletin board each day until it is beautiful. You will really appreciate it, too!

Things That Annoy

I know that schools are short of money, but I find it very annoying when money priorities are wrong. In some schools primary teachers have a very low photocopying limit. Some schools do not put money into the classroom libraries. Teachers are buying books to help them teach and to help the children learn. And most teachers spend money on their classrooms - how many other professions do this?

Don't the people in charge understand that the primary years are the most important? If children get a good foundation, the rest of their years of education will be much easier - and without this successful background, future failure is almost assured. Instead of Grade One being the most important, it seems that many educators feel that the importance increases as the grade number gets larger.

I get annoyed when I hear teachers on-line saying that their children are doing poorly because the parents are not pulling their weight. Of course it is great when the children read and work at home, but the responsibility belongs with the teacher. Parents are often not good 'teachers' - many are working hard and do not see their children until dinner time. From then until bedtime it is most important that there is good family time, and school work is frequently put aside. Put a sign on your desk - 'The buck stops here....' Do not blame the parents - work to give the children all the practice they need and let them play when they get home.

What is 'authentic' reading? Why is some reading authentic and other reading not? I don't understand this. If it means published material - well, there is a lot of that I would not call literature. If you write sentences on a chart to help the students learn words - is that authentic? If your students read little books that are phonetic, is this authentic reading? Come on! Reading is reading.....

Something went wrong when principals began to be called administrators. It begins to be a financial position rather than the head of the school with responsibility for the education of the children. Does your principal really understand what is involved in teaching the primary grades? Many don't! I once had a principal who was new to the job. At the beginning of the first year he went to each of the primary teachers and asked if he could spend time in our classrooms and ask us lots of questions so he could understand what we were doing. He was great! On the other hand, I have had a principal who knew nothing about primary and told me that I couldn't teach reading the way I had been successfully doing it - that what I was doing was wrong.

Educational fads really annoy me

1. They start out with an initial flurry of interest/activity, often based on the results of 'recent studies' or surveys. We have to listen to the 'experts' and keep track of the data they provide.
2. This is followed by a few people (usually someone in an 'influential' position... not 'just a teacher') in the district attending some sort of workshop/training to become an 'expert' in this new approach.
3. This person often arranges to fly in some kind of 'national guru' for an inspirational talk.
4. Interest spreads throughout the district thanks to a multitude of workshops/trainings on this great new approach.
5. Everyone signs up (not always willingly), takes the courses, and immediately starts using the 'latest vocabulary' wherever they go.
6. Camaraderie develops. Jargon abounds.
7. The new approach is tried in classrooms, with mixed results, but mostly bordering on 'not so great'.
8. There is reluctance to admit that this great new approach may not be all that it's cracked up to be.
9. Early adopters feel guilty and blame themselves ('I must not be implementing it properly,' or 'Maybe I don't have enough training.')
10. Interest wanes. Workshops become fewer and fewer. Jargon is used less and less.
11. Go to Step 1.

Handwriting

When did you last write a letter? It is said that the era of handwriting has come to an end. Certainly I know that my handwriting has suffered in the ten years since I got my first computer. We need to have lots of practice to develop and to retain a skill. What do I write now? Grocery lists and my name on a few cheques to pay things that I can't pay on-line.

One in three children struggle with their handwriting and apparently almost one in five teenagers slip into text message/e-mail language when they do put pen to paper, according to a survey. If the figures are representative, this apparent demise of handwriting could have serious implications for educational achievement.

Currently, 40% of boys and 25% of girls, aged 11, fail to meet the required standards for writing in tests. Although only a small part of the marks in this test are awarded for good handwriting and spelling skills, experts argue the child's handwriting ability and the quality of the text are linked. There is growing evidence that those students who write faster and more legibly get better marks. This is because poor handwriting itself is hampering a child's ability to express himself.

You can see this in your primary classroom. If you have your children practice printing every day and gradually increase the amount and if you have high expectations for neatness and letter formation, the children will be printing more and more fluently as the year goes by. As they begin to print fluently their creative writing will increase and improve in quality - at a much faster rate than without the printing lessons. For one thing, the children will not be concentrating on the physical act of printing any more and will be able to concentrate on the sentences and the story. They will be able to read it back to themselves more easily and be able to edit more accurately. As writing is communication, it is important that others can read the work, too. If a child has not automated his/her handwriting or printing skills the writing process will be severely slowed because of the effort involved in forming the letters.

Physical gross motor activity and play also helps to improve the fine motor skills, and many children are not getting the outdoor play that previous generations did. Children are watching TV, playing computer and video games instead of increasing the physical skills that are needed. PE activities that involve hand-eye coordination can help to produce better fine motor skill.

Of course, in the primary grades all of this is dependent on the teacher. Lessons on letter formation and insistence on correct formation are very important in Kindergarten and Grade One, and once the students are confident with this then it is up to the teacher to ensure that this continues in all printed work. Good teaching will make the difference.

And, just as in reading and math, fluency and confidence comes with a huge amount of practice. You may begin in Grade One with a few words each day, increasing to sentences. By Christmas in Grade One your children should be able to copy between 4 and 10 sentences in a lesson. By the end of Grade One they should be able to print automatically. They will be able to think about the spelling and the sentences, and they will print the words without conscious thought of the letter formation. That is ideal.

In late primary most teachers teach handwriting. The same rules apply. The students must be taught the letter formation, joining the letters, writing words and then sentences. As their knowledge and fluency progresses, the amount of writing should increase.

As the students go up through the grades they will be expected to write longer stories and examinations. This writing must be legible and neat. It will increase the students' marks if the writing is fluent and well done - not just because the marker finds the work easier to read and judge the content, but because the writers themselves will organize their thoughts better when the work is neatly done.

All of this begins in Kindergarten and goes right through the primary grades. After this it is difficult if not impossible to change. It is up to every teacher to give the students the advantage of being able to print and write fluently and accurately.

Low Readers in Grade 2 and 3

In the first weeks of school, teachers in Grades Two and sometimes Grade Three may find a group of students who are having problems with reading simple material. These children may have a sight vocabulary of 50 words or less and may not be blending sounds to decode. Occasionally a child may come to you who does not have any reading skills! Unless something is done now, these children will continue to have problems with reading and will always be behind their peers. The long-term effects of this can be devastating - the child may act out and be troublesome, and the chances of him/her being functionally illiterate as an adult is high.

You will also have high readers in your new class, and it is difficult to take this group of slower readers back to their level without grouping. We can simply hope that things will click and that they will begin to improve, and this occasionally happens - but we cannot count on this.

The odds are that you will have between two and five children in your class who have learning disabilities. They may have visual disabilities (dyslexia) or auditory difficulties. These students may be sent to get special time with the Learning Assistant. Special Education services will help these students if they are given enough time there, but you cannot give all the responsibility to another teacher. The problem with students leaving the classroom for instruction is that it does not have any follow-up in the classroom. Having the L.A. teacher come to your classroom to give the students help with the lessons you give the quicker students does not give the assistance that these children need.

So what can you do? These students must have specific sequential lessons in order to succeed, and that means that they need a program such as the direct instruction of Reading Mastery from S.R.A. or the Primary Success programs of Successful Phonics and/or Successful Sight Reading. A year of concentrated sequential lessons will make a huge difference to their reading and their future.

To do this, you should take this group of slower children for half an hour every day. The other students could be doing printed exercises, silent reading or other silent activities. There should be no interruptions and a quiet atmosphere. You will be amazed at your group's progress, and you may find that some of these students will catch up to the class.

Test these students before you begin. Test them on the Dolch words or other word lists, and do simple oral reading to find their level. In Grade Two you will likely start at the beginning again with all the programs as a review, working quickly until you reach their level and then making sure that the students achieve mastery as you proceed. In Grade Three you would begin simply to make sure any gaps in knowledge are filled before teaching material that is new to the students.

If you have children in your class who have not done well on the program that was taught in the previous year(s), do something different. If your students were taught through literature, do sight words and phonics. If they have been taught through a phonics program, do a visual program teaching words by sight. If they have been taught sight words and are not succeeding, teach a sequential phonics program. To do more of the same and expect a different result is not realistic!

Have fun with this group! Do quick drills and play word games. Laugh and be silly sometimes. The students will enjoy it more and learn faster, and the rest of the class will be envious.

Classroom Schedules and Expectations

Our brighter, more mature and secure students may thrive in an unpredictable environment. These students will also thrive when there are strict routines and consistency. Perhaps two-thirds of the students in any classroom will have some degree of difficulty when they don't know what to expect. There will be more problems when the students are over-stimulated, hurried, have to wait between activities or confused about what is going to happen. Changes in classroom routine may cause severe problems for students with emotional or other disabilities such as ADHD - and everyone around them.

Most students benefit from a daily schedule that is adhered to as much as possible. The schedule can be helpful to promote peaceful transitions from exciting activities to quiet ones. If students understand the progression to the next activity, the transitions will be smoother. The schedules will help the students to know what is expected of them and to promote responsibility and self-control. They will eventually understand the time available to complete assignments.

A concise schedule also helps the teacher to plan ahead. There will be fewer lessons missed or changed so the planning will be more efficient. Of course, a schedule must have enough flexibility to allow the teacher to change lessons to provide those great teaching moments and to respond to unexpected events.

Lessons should be planned so that they contain several different types of instruction and practice. There may be a review of previously taught skills, the teaching of new skills, hands-on practice, shared discussion or practice, individual practice and a closure. Some students in every class will do better work if the tasks are divided into small more manageable parts.

Post the schedule in the classroom where all the students can see it, and refer to it often through the day. In primary classrooms it helps to put a clock beside each activity, so the students can see when the next will begin. It is useful to remind students of the time left to complete an activity and to tell them of an impending change.

Establishing expectations will help to make your classroom run more smoothly. This is not as simple as deciding on them - they must be taught, modeled, reviewed and practiced every day, until the students completely understand what is expected and automatically respond in the manner you wish. This is not necessarily the same as the classroom 'rules'. Rules apply generally to behaviour but expectations refer to all parts of the school day from behaviour to work habits and learning. High expectations will produce high results! If you expect the students to print neatly and teach them well, their printing will be wonderful. If you expect them to walk quietly in the hall and practice it, that is what they will do.

These expectations can be school-wide, if the Principal desires it, with recognition given to students and classes who excel. The school can support the teachers to produce high expectations in the classroom. Top schools do this. These schools give special assistance to students with behavioural and learning difficulties so the teacher has a team of people to assist. Excellence means high expectations in academic learning and behaviour.

Each classroom can be operated with high expectations, with or without the assistance of the school team, directed by the teacher. It can be 'top-down', with the teacher reinforcing the expectations and establishing praise, prizes and punishment for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. It can also be partially a teacher/student approach, with the children helping to set the expectations and partially enforcing them.

School or classroom expectations must be simple and understood by all. They should be positive and explicit. Students who do not live up to the expectations set should receive an appropriate consequence. Teachers who have high expectations will have students who produce higher quality work, learn more quickly and behave more appropriately.

Educational Experts

Teachers are professionals. You have been well educated and then given the awesome responsibility of teaching children to be literate. Every experienced teacher considers herself to be an expert. As you teach using your own philosophies and beliefs, it is imperative that you feel that these are serving you and your students well. After all, your reputation and the student's progress depend on these philosophies as well as your skill in imparting them.

Teachers are also great communicators. They are able to defend their philosophies with great verbal skill. Because many teachers also add passion to their teaching beliefs, they can rationalize these in a way that is very difficult to challenge. Many teachers stake their reputations on a single philosophy, and this is where a problem arises. This makes it very difficult to grow and change.

I know all this, because I have been there! At every stage of my career I strongly felt that I was teaching the very best programs in the very best way for my students. Unfortunately, this was not completely true, but it took me 25 years to discover it. Then, I had a few 'breakthroughs' when I was forced to try different programs and learned more about the learning of my students and my teaching. Now I hold several truths: children learn best when taught sequential programs and specific lessons; children are all different and learn differently so they need to be taught a variety of methods; and that I do not have all the answers!

People who tell you that they know the best way to teach children to read generally have a stake in this method. Authors, publishers and universities have either monetary interest or a reputation that is tied closely to the philosophy. This is another reason why an individual teacher must keep an open mind and not accept methods on face value. Governments and school districts sometimes adopt books and methods for reasons other than the results.

Yes, results! We are in the business of achieving results. The best result is when all the students are learning to their potential. This is a goal that we can never completely achieve, but we should be constantly striving to reach. Too many schools and teachers deride standardized test results as unimportant, but they give us very important information. If our children are learning to read and do math well, they will do well on the standardized tests or on tests that are given to a large number of students. Of course we should never teach to a test, and of course thinking skills and imagination are important and must be encouraged. But standardized tests tell you whether your program, philosophy and teaching are providing your students with the best possible education. Teachers who use a variety of sequential programs and who are always open to learn new methods will usually have good results, even in schools in lower socio-economic areas. Good teachers teaching good programs have high results and poorer teachers or teachers using poorer programs have lower results! Standardized testing gives you this information, and hopefully encourages the teacher and school to change and improve.

The programs and methods should be judged by the learning of the lower students in your class. Many of your kiddies will learn well no matter what program they are taught, because they only need to be pointed in the direction of literacy and they do the rest themselves. Never take all the credit for the results of the top children in your class! The progress of the lowest ten children tells your true skill. The very best teachers do not see the need of sending the lowest kiddies to the learning assistant to be taught to read. The programs and methods they use and their expert teaching do the best for these students. The learning assistant could give them extra reading to practice what they have been taught, but the responsibility belongs to the classroom teacher.

Do not let others tell you the best ways to teach literacy - find out for yourself! Research is often skewed, and professional 'experts' are very often wrong or are only partially right. Teach every method you can find and take the best of each. Use standardized tests to rate your own proficiency. Keep an open mind to all methods and philosophies. You are the expert!

Education in China

I have just returned from a three week 'discovery' tour of China (2006). During this time we visited two schools and had many guides tell us about the education system in that country.

The first thing is that there is a large difference in the development of cities and the rural areas. The cities are filled with construction - lovely buildings and architecture (and a constant building of simple, rather poor housing blocks as more and more people flock to the cities). Much of the farmland near the cities is now being destroyed for factories, and a pall of smog hangs over most of the country. In the rural areas, many people still live in simple traditional ways.

One of the effects of the 'one child per family' policy is that this one child holds the future of the family's fortune.

The children are pushed by their parents to learn from a very young age. They usually go to kindergarten at the age of three. There are three 'grades' of kindergarten - One, for 3 and 4 year olds, Two, for 4 and 5 year olds and Three for 5 and 6 year old children. We visited a kindergarten where the students are learning to read, write, to speak English, learn early math - and have fun, too. They stay there the length of a working day, as both parents usually work outside the home. We saw a sleeping room, where the children had afternoon naps. The teacher of the youngest group was absolutely wonderful as she led them in songs for us. The children were happy, chatty and laughed often.

After kindergarten, the students go to primary school, which lasts six years. Now there is additional pressure on the students to do well. They work at school all day and then do hours of homework and study - often not getting to bed until 10:00 p.m. or later. This continues through the high school. There are few university spaces available for the hundreds of thousands of students wanting a place, so the students work very hard to get the best marks. This puts tremendous pressure on the young people, and their health often suffers.

Obviously, there are problems with their system. That being said, the education that these students are getting is turning out highly knowledgeable young people with a strong work ethic. The guides we had in all the cities spoke almost perfect English, with knowledge of idiom. Most of them understood the subtleties in our language and were quick witted and could freely joke in English. Some of them had taught themselves - a dedication to work that is admirable. Several said that their parents were disappointed in their achievements and wanted them to be in business or government translations - and wondered why they didn't become a doctors or lawyers. The younger generation looks after the older one in their later years and extended families live together.

The Chinese put a large emphasis on health. Their meals are largely vegetables with noodles or rice and small amounts of meat or fish. Every morning the parks are crowded with people ballroom dancing, doing Tai Chi and other group exercise. People ride bikes or walk to work. We rarely saw people who were over-weight, and the older people seemed very active.

Everyone in China seems to want to better themselves. Huge numbers of people are moving from the country to the cities to make a better liv-

ing for their families. There are tiny stores everywhere, people selling produce, and this enthusiasm for education. It will be interesting to see where this country will be in twenty years!



The youngest group and the great teacher singing and waddling like ducks across the bridge.



These are children in the third year of Kindergarten.