

...but the North Halton Literacy Guild can help

Educators must "build fires in...kids" Student used to disguise spelling with handwriting

By BEN DUMMETT
Herald Staff

Students' ability to read will be lost forever if the school system fails to cultivate their desire to read, the Halton Board of Education Co-ordinator of English Language Arts and Drama says.

"We (educators) have to build fires in the kids," Micki Clemens says.

Today's educators are teaching reading in the context of their student's experience. The reading learning process becomes meaningful to the students when this happens, she said.

Teachers used phonetic drills and exercise books to teach reading 10 or 15 years ago, making the experience boring for most students, Ms. Clemens said.

Harrison Public School Kindergarten teacher, Catherine MacGillivray, says teachers no longer use the "go see Dick and Jane" method of teaching. Now they use a meaningful subject like Halloween to excite children about reading.

The "whole language approach" is the term teachers use to describe the method used to teach children today.

All facets of language are taught in relation to one another. The idea is that reading cannot be divorced from the related activities of writing, listening, speaking, presenting and viewing.

Carole Matheson, the principal of George Kennedy Public School, says children learn a book's meaning by reading it, acting it out, talking to other students about it, making a presentation based on it, listening to it being read, watching a related film and "writing, writing and writing."

High school teachers also encourage their students to actively participate in the learning process, Anthony Buzzelli, the Bishop Reding High School English Department head, says. His goal is to create independent learners. Mr. Buzzelli sets the class' goals and asks students for their input on how they should be achieved.

Teachers can no longer expect results if they stand in front of the class and just spew out information, he said.

Teachers no long use go see Dick and Jane method of teaching
—Public school teacher Catherine MacGillivray—

However, teachers aren't restricted to one way of teaching. They are expected to adapt their teaching methods to fit the needs of each student. While some students react positively to the whole language approach others react better to the more traditional phonetic style, Ms. MacGillivray said.

And if the regular classroom teacher cannot help a student, a special education teacher is called in.

The special education teacher at St. Francis of Assisi School in Georgetown, Theresa Demytrug, says her role is to identify the student's problem and set up a suitable program.

Teachers agree they alone are not responsible for a student's reading capabilities. Parents also

play a vital role. Parents should start reading to their children as soon as they're able to sit up and listen, the principal of Glen Williams Public School, Doug Magwood, said.

They also agreed that students' reading level is higher today than it was when they were in school. However they acknowledged like all systems, theirs is imperfect and some students leave not as prepared as they might be. But teachers say there are fewer of these students today.

The principal of Burlington's Rolling Meadows Public School, Rob Collard, who completed a report on dropouts in January, wouldn't speculate on whether the increased reading level over the years will translate into a lower drop-out rate.

Mr. Collard found that of the students who were expected to graduate with a Grade 12 diploma in 1986 and 1987 but who dropped out early, all experienced difficulty reading throughout their education careers.

Just over nine per cent of the 275 students surveyed in each year, dropped out, he said.

Although he couldn't make a direct link between the students' reading problems and their dropping out of school, he said it was a significant factor.

It would be appropriate to conduct a similar study in five years time to see if the drop-out rates have gone down, given the improvements made in teaching language arts, he said.

The students making up the sample would have started school sometime during the transition from the old style of teaching to the new one, he explained.

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Mary (not her real name) decided to improve her spelling, reading and writing because she was embarrassed when her nieces and nephews asked to spell a word, and she couldn't do it.

"I didn't feel good and I had no self-esteem at all," is the way Mary summed up her feelings towards those dreaded meetings.

The 21-year-old Acton resident is one of thousands of Canadians who are functionally illiterate. Someone with less than a Grade 9 education reading level is recognized as functionally illiterate, the president of the North Halton Literacy Guild Betsy Cornwell says.

"I didn't feel good and I had no self esteem at all"
—adult learner—

One in five Canadians can't read, she says. However the ratio is better in Halton Hills. The guild's most recent statistics show approximately one in 10 living in the area, can't read.

The three-year-old guild teaches adults, both young and old, and from different socio-economic backgrounds how to read. Its tutors focus on teaching adults language used among family members and in the work place, Ms. Cornwell said.

Before acknowledging her problem and seeking help Mary learned to avoid situations that would test her reading and writing ability.

"I used to disguise my spelling errors with messy handwriting. Or

I'd play "deaf ears" when someone asked me to read something I knew I couldn't. It got where I did it so often I didn't even notice it," she said.

But Mary realized the problem had to be dealt with if she was to achieve her goals.

She and her husband eventually wanted to have children but she also wanted to be able to read to them.

Increased job opportunities is another reason Mary sought help. "I wasn't going to get a decent job with my reading and spelling."

The most difficult aspect of Mary's problems hasn't been the learning process but rather admitting there was a problem.

She's enjoying the learning but "it's frustrating at times."

Since signing up with the guild in May, Mary meets weekly with her tutor, Gina Mancini. Together they decided on what should be worked on and how to go about doing it.

Each lesson starts off with a review of what Mary did during the previous week. She is required to keep a daily journal and read nightly. They also spend considerable time on Mary's spelling. This includes working on the pronunciation of words. To spell correctly, you first have to be able to sound out the word, Ms. Mancini said.

Mary blames no one but herself for her reading difficulties. "My teachers were great. I just didn't give them enough of a chance," she said.

Mary hopes to improve her literacy level so she can complete her Grade 12 diploma. She quit school in Grade 10. Beyond that, she's thinking about college but she will take it one step at a time.



Halton Hills Mayor Russ Miller (second from the right) helped members of the Georgetown branch of the Arthritis Society kick off the beginning of Arthritis month last Thursday outside the Civic Centre. Those present at the flag-raising ceremony were (from left) the Halton Campaign co-ordinator Pat

Lepage, B.G. Artie - a.k.a., Audrey Hoekstra, the campaign's co-chairman for Georgetown and District - Doug Tucker, Downtown Georgetown co-chairman - Bob Beaton, and Co-chairman for Georgetown and District - Joe Johnson. (Herald photo)



Steaming along at the C.N.E.

Halton Hills resident Jack Layman was on hand at the Canadian National Exhibition last week to display his steam engines. Mr. Layman, seen here showing some of his wares, has displayed his steam engines at Georgetown Pioneer Days since the inception of the downtown celebration. (Photo courtesy of Thomson News Service)

Clog with the 50 pluses

You can clog with the 50 plus Clogging Club starting the week of Sept. 10. The only requirement is that you are at least 50 years old.

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