Project ASSIST Institute: An Orton-Gillingham/Spalding Based Curriculum for Teachers and Volunteers

Virginia L. Biasotto

Project ASSIST Institute
Wilmington, Delaware

In spite of our best efforts, our son Andrew did not learn to read until he attended the Jemicy School at the age of 12. Our search for help and eventual success led me to take the Orton-Gillingham approach into the public schools of Delaware, first with volunteers and then with teachers.

In 1991–92, the Milford School District did a Pre-Post Design pilot using the Woodcock Johnson Reading Mastery Test for decoding and comprehension and the WRAT Revised for spelling. The results are included.

Another pilot with a control group from another school district is being done in 1992–93 and a third pilot is being planned for New Castle County, Delaware in 1993–94.

Training for teachers in the juvenile justice system is also planned for 1993–94.

Beginnings

Early in our son Andrew's life there were signs and signals that his thought processes didn't connect in the same way that ours did. His shoes were frequently on the wrong feet, his shirt went on wrong-side-out and backwards, and his socks rarely matched. Unfortunately, we did not understand his signals. We thought this was just a phase—a young child learning to dress himself the hard way!

In school, there was a dramatic difference in the way Andrew ap-
proached learning as well. While other children were learning their letters, he played in the workshop. He was very happy, but we were terribly concerned. Unfortunately, school officials were not. They felt he was just a little immature and that he would catch up eventually.

We watched Andrew struggle. By the end of first grade, he had not learned to read or write. He wouldn’t even look at a book and his writing was sometimes upside down and backwards. He repeated first grade with no change. His report card read “No effort. No achievement. Kicking and spitting on the playground.” By the time we experimented with daily tutoring, developmental lenses, eye tracking exercises, the Feingold diet, ritalin, and summer school programs, our once happy child was a miserably unhappy sixth-grader who faced junior high school with little or no reading skills.

This paper describes how we finally got help for Andrew, the process that “cracked the code” for him and allowed him to learn to read, and how we developed that process into a highly successful reading program for Delaware schools.

We looked for help outside the school system. Testing by psychologist Dr. Milton Brutten gave his problem a name, dyslexia. Dr. Brutten declared that there were only a handful of schools in the nation prepared to help Andrew bridge the seven-year gap between his reading level and his mental age. The one closest to home was Jemicy School in Baltimore, Maryland.

Andrew went to Jemicy. During the week, he lived with his tutor, Nancy Simonetti, and her family. They put him on the train every Friday night to return to us in Wilmington, and we returned him to them on Sunday. It was emotionally very hard, but the results of his stay were well worth it. His reading level jumped six years. Andrew described Jemicy as “the most wonderful school in the world.”

When Andrew began to learn to read, I wanted to know what they were doing at Jemicy School that was different from all of the approaches used in the other elementary schools and college summer programs he had attended. When I asked, they challenged me to “Come and see.”

I did, and three semesters later completed Orton-Gillingham training. I felt as excited as if I had found a cure for cancer. I knew now that some children do not automatically relate sound to symbol. The marks on a page are an unfathomable mystery. The Orton-Gillingham approach works for them because it is: (1) alphabetic, letters and their sounds form the basis for all reading and spelling; (2) multisensory, all senses are linked to teach sound-symbol relationships; and (3) sequential, as each new phonogram is taught it is blended into previously learned phonograms to form syllables and words.

If Andrew could learn to read through this instruction, then many