



PROFESSIONAL MONOGRAPH SERIES

THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL OF BERGEN COUNTY ■ MONOGRAPH NUMBER TWO ■ APRIL 1996

Twenty-Five Years... The Community School Program

by Rita Rowan, Executive Director, Community School

THIS ARTICLE FIRST APPEARED IN COMMUNITY SCHOOL NEWS & NOTES,
ON THE OCCASION OF THE SCHOOL'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY.

Twenty-five years of successful, inspiring, ground breaking operation: 1968-1993. In the fall of 1993 Community School will celebrate the 25th anniversary of our founding. Thus, the end of this spring's school term will mark the 25th year of teaching and treating learning disabled children. And what years they were! Every one an adventure; every one an experience in self-discovery as teachers. Every one of those years taught us something new and exciting about the business we were in. Yet through it all, though the founding assumptions remained solid and immutable (see "Community School News and Notes," Volume 1, Number 1), that didn't prevent us from experimenting with all sorts of variations on the theme.

Perhaps the most useful innovation to come out of our daily exposure to the nature of instruction was the experiment with teaching in groups. In our early years, the "Model" in special education had children as isolated units, learning in self-contained classrooms. Lesson plans were written for the child and, as time allowed, the teacher spent a portion of each instructional period with each one. Because of the wide range of achievement levels and skill acquisition in any one class, little, if any, group instruction was undertaken. How unhappy and lonely for children that model was!

Within the first few years of our existence we recognized the inadequacy of that model. Children who most desperately needed experience interacting with age-mates were denied

access to each other. No exchange of ideas; no practice interacting; no expansion of scope. Clearly this scheme could not be accepted. While all were feeling somewhat critical of our performance during that time, it was through the urging of dedicated and imaginative teachers who would not accept anything less than the best we could give, that a simple experiment in group teaching was undertaken.

And experiment we did; tentatively at first, and later, as we marveled at the results, with greater conviction that we were indeed onto something. After lo these many years, one wonders at the apprehension. The conventional wisdom had it that LD children simply could not handle stimulation. LD children would be distracted by the proximity of other children. What we didn't take into account in anticipating results was the reality that we already understood very well: attention in bright children, however distractible, could be hooked by ideas. This observation was forthrightly confirmed and that first small reading group was immediately turned on! Four bright but reading disabled seventh graders were *experiencing* a book together. It was of high interest, albeit adapted, and it captured their imagination. It must be mentioned here that we were greatly helped by the then-recent appearance on the American publishing scene of a small number of classic pieces of fiction written to teach adults English as a second language. The four students read, they discussed, they argued points, they anticipated. In short, they did what any of us do when we read a good piece of fiction.

Greatly encouraged, we devised other groups. Math proved workable; and so did social studies. We had a geography/study skills group that worked on research and report writing. The results were positive. Teachers got down to business and wrote curricula and syllabi that could be

widely used. We developed study guides for particular novels. One of the most popular was George Orwell's *1984*. Poor and good readers alike simply adored that book. The students learned to write answers to questions in essay style. Gone were the tedious workbooks. Gone were the monotonous exercises. What we found was that the children no longer fought reading. Attention stayed riveted and we were able to profitably harness children's innate appetite for good stories. We also found that this method could be applied at any age.

In general, we found that motivation increased; behavior problems decreased. Group sessions were attended with enthusiasm. Children benefited from their frequent interaction and exchange of ideas. The natural ebullience and high energy levels we find in the LD population provided fodder for exciting talk and discussion with the teacher acting as moderator. Learning became fun!

We also discovered that the direct teaching of skills was not incompatible with this new format. There is sufficient time after all, in a 45-minute period to apportion some part of it to skill introduction, drill and review. And because we were careful to keep the groups as narrowly homogeneous as possible in skill needs and achievement levels, the formulas proved eminently workable. For at least the last ten years we have been following an organizational structure built around small, homogeneous instructional groups in every area. Though we still find it necessary to offer intensive, clinical individual instruction for specific children who demonstrate a severe level of disability, we are convinced that the benefits of teaching a number of children at a time are quite clear; isolating children as single learning units can never again be our answer. And because of this, we are quite intellectually compatible with the new trends in mainstream

education such as team learning and whole language. We have learned how to individualize even within the small group, so that children who differ on various measures of achievement or processing can be accommodated quite effectively. We recognize the advantages of allowing

children to learn from one another, and we are convinced that in group teaching, instructional time is maximized in the most effective way. Most of all, we are rewarded by the daily observation that, almost without exception, the children love coming to school.

The Professional Monograph Series
The Community School of Bergen County

Lower School

11 West Forest Avenue, Teaneck, NJ 07666
(201) 837-8070

High School

1135 Teaneck Road, Teaneck, NJ 07666
(201) 862-1796