DIR
A Remedial Program for Reading
Intensive Intervention in Reading

Christian Boyer

Éditions de l’Apprentissage
The remedial program for reading DIR proposes an original and provocative, but rational insight into the problematic of students with learning disabilities. Furthermore, this book presents an innovative, demanding and consequent approach to remedial education.

(DIR is aimed towards remedial teachers, but also towards any individual preoccupied by the fate of our struggling students.

Christian Boyer has held several positions in the field of education: teacher, remedial teacher, pedagogical consultant and vice-principal. He is currently working as a Consultant for SESSIONS, a firm he founded in 1995. In 2009, he established Éditions de l’Apprentissage, a publishing house that specializes in publishing educational resources and articles pertaining to education and remedial education, stemming from the programs he has developed in reading and writing.
Christian Boyer

DIR: A Remedial Program for Reading
Intensive Intervention in Reading

Translation: Chantal Gerard

ÉDITIONS DE L'APPRENTISSAGE
For all the children who may develop or are struggling with learning difficulties, damned by our utopian and unscientific pedagogical reforms and negligent special education interventions.

I hope for more scientific rigour, fewer prescribed edicts by the Ministry of Education, more coherence, less pedagogical beliefs, and more faith in the potential of our children who are at risk or currently struggling with learning difficulties.
The special education program DIR in reading is designed for grades 1 through high school. Since 1990, 250 special educators have been trained in this program, which follows the Explicit Teaching model. This program has been used in Ontario, in French, and in Québec, in French and English. A modified version of the DIR program is also being applied in Spanish in the Dominican Republic.

Christian Boyer is the creator and driving force behind the program, as well as most of the strategies and activities related to its use.
Introduction

This book outlines the first learning program I created during my career documenting the rational and empirical theories of the DIR program for reading, and all the other programs I have written¹. It takes both a critical and satirical tone towards a certain pedagogical mainstream often followed in a sheepishly blind fashion.

I begin by briefly outlining the history of the program, followed by a description of the underlying rationale of its main characteristics. In this book, I will outline the arguments and methods of my program. After reading this text and its appendices, you should have a good understanding of the foundation of the DIR program in reading. Finally, the last section of the book presents results from the application of the DIR program, with or without the support of my other programs.

Doubt at the Origin of the DIR Program

In the fall of 1990, the first version of the “Développement Intensif du Raisonnement” (DIR) program for reading, commonly known as “l’Intervention intensive” in reading, was born in Estrie, Québec.

¹. DIR for Reading which is also known as Intensive Development of Reasoning (“Développement intensif du raisonnement”) in reading at elementary and secondary levels; DIR for writing which is also known as Intensive Development of Reasoning in Writing in elementary and secondary levels; ADOR, Accelerated Development of Reading in grade 1; ETRCR, Explicit Teaching of Reasoning and Comprehension in Reading from grade 2 to secondary levels; ETRRW, Explicit Teaching of Reasoning and Redacting in Writing in elementary and secondary levels; IC, I Can in Kindergarten.
The DIR program grew from a deep questioning of the efficiency of special education interventions and free flow intervention. When I say “deep questioning of the efficiency,” I am mincing my words... The evidence appears to be more abrupt: it seems that children with learning difficulties\(^2\) who are benefitting from special education services often do not improve or worse, certain children sometimes obtain weaker results than if they had not benefitted from these services. This strangely resembles the efficiency of medieval bleeding...

**Disturbing Findings**

In August 1990, I was named Vice-Principal of an elementary school in Estrie, Québec, Canada. I read a book by Slavin, Karweit, and Madden (1989) that shed doubt on the efficiency of free flow intervention. Inspired by this book, I pretentiously suggested to the experienced special educator at my school that she evaluate the effects of her interventions, since I suspected they were ineffective. Despite my boldness, new title, and limited teaching experience, the school’s special educator accepted my challenge.

Rigorously evaluating the effects of special education interventions is not a common practice, nor is it of real concern in Québec schools and school boards. After discussing with the school’s special educator ways to objectively evaluate the effects of her interventions, we agreed to measure the oral reading rate\(^3\)

---

2. In this text, *children with learning difficulties* designates children whose achievement level is weak, whether it be due to dyslexia, slow learning, or other cognitive or social behavioural problems. I do not think these distinctions are pertinent (Boyer, 2000), due to our current poor knowledge in this area (still true in 2011).

3. From the very beginning, we were fully aware that measuring the reading
of all pupils in a chosen grade, at the beginning of the special education intervention, after four weeks, and again at eight weeks of intervention.

The objective in evaluating all pupils, both those benefitting from special education services and those remaining in class, using the same instruments and under the same conditions, was to determine an objective marker to measure the progress of pupils benefitting from special education services. We often see special educators elated with their pupils’ progress, while classroom teachers of the same pupils have a slightly different opinion of their progress, some going so far as to see a decline… The problem is simple, the gap between pupils benefitting from special education services and pupils in the regular classroom can increase even when pupils benefitting from special education services improve. Why? Because pupils in the regular classroom “do not stop learning or do not wait” for the pupils benefitting from special education services. If a pupil benefitting from special education services improves ten centimeters, the pupils in the regular classroom can improve one meter, thus rendering null and void the progress of a pupil benefitting from special education services. A special educator that does not have an objective marker might be easily fooled when interpreting the progress level of her pupils. As Lecomte du Noüy (1964) would say, “It is the scale of observation that creates the phenomenon.”

rate on its own (we evaluated rate and accuracy simultaneously, see Appendix A, p. 73 for term definitions) was a short cut to measuring reading skills. However, it is obvious that a child who has difficulty sounding out words will almost automatically have problems with reading comprehension, while a child who is able to easily sound out words has a better chance of improving his reading comprehension. Although reading rate is an important and reliable indication of the development of reading it is not enough, and does not allow for a complete portrait of a child’s reading skills. That being said, reading comprehension evaluations were integrated as of November 1990.
Not expecting great results from the evaluation of the efficiency of the special educator’s program in my school, I was flabbergasted by our observations. After both four and eight weeks of intervention, the results were disastrous. Comparing the results of the pupils benefitting from special education services with those not benefitting from special education services in the same grade, we observed that 60% of the pupils benefitting from special education services did not progress, 20% showed a decline, and only 20% showed a more or less significant improvement. From these findings and the reading of several experimental American studies and reflections, the DIR program began to take shape. The first version of DIR was tested in the fall of 1990.

Are these catastrophic results observed in my school an isolated incident? No, this upsetting state of affairs appears to be common. In the 1990s, several authors reached the same conclusion concerning the efficiency of special education interventions, particularly concerning free flow intervention

---

4. Regretfully, I cannot find all the notes describing this epic journey. From memory, there were approximately 30 pupils ranging from grades 1 to 3 that benefitted from special education services. The group of pupils that did not benefit from special education services (pupils remaining in the regular classroom) was close to 80.

5. Our circumstances did not permit us to isolate the variables that could accurately define the reasons why this intervention failed, but one thing was certain, it did not work! The special educator’s professionalism was without question; she was completely devoted. The content of the activities used in her free flow intervention approach were very similar to those still used today, including sight words, phonics, writing awareness (concepts related to words, letters, titles, authors, illustrations…), putting mixed words in the correct order in a sentence, arranging mixed sentences of a text in order, reading sentences and short texts, answering comprehension questions while reading and after having read a text, closure texts, dictation of words and sentences, and explaining the meaning of new words… Children were met individually or in small groups of two to four for 30 to 40-minute sessions, three to four times a week. In addition, the relationship between the special educator and her pupils was excellent.
(Pikulsi, 1994; Vaugh, Moody, and Schumm, 1998). On the other hand, in North America the 1980s and 1990s saw the growth of the Whole Language movement. This could lead one to believe that during this period, poor results from special education interventions were due to the strong influence of the Whole Language approach on teaching practices (Vaughn, Moody, and Schumm, 1998). It is important to note that the effects of Whole Language, as opposed to Explicit Teaching, on pupils of poor socio-economic backgrounds and pupils struggling academically were negative in terms of their learning performance (Jeynes and Littell, 2000; Stahl and Miller, 1989). It is almost certain that the influence of this approach did not encourage the success of struggling pupils in North America. Sadly, the efficiency of special education interventions still remains questionable, and children benefitting from this service could likely regress rather than progress (Moody et al., 2000; Parent, 2008).

The study done by Parent (2008) and carried out in Québec schools is interesting despite its weaknesses. The researcher followed 16 special educators who used pull-out services to assist 72 struggling children in grades 1 to 4. The pupils were usually seen in groups of four or five, 10 hours a week. The contents

6. The Whole Language movement, risen again, is now known as “Balanced Reading Instruction.”
7. A questionnaire completed by the special educators at the end of the school year allowed the researcher to gather facts. This method of evaluation is weak because it relies solely on the special educators’ memory and perception. To measure the time devoted, direct observation would have been a stronger objective method. Certain special educators report that they have devoted 26 to 28 hours per week to certain groups using pull-out services. That exceeds the number of teaching hours required weekly by the government! In more than 20 years of practice as a pedagogical consultant, in more than 300 schools in Québec and Ontario, I have never witnessed that many hours devoted to remedial teaching. Realistically, we can only presume the number of hours to be less than that presented in Parent’s report.
of the interventions varied, including phonemic awareness, phonics, shared reading,\textsuperscript{8} silent reading, reading to the pupils, teaching of strategies (decoding and comprehension), and tasks aimed at developing vocabulary and writing activities (calligraphy, grammar, writing sentences, copying words...). The results were catastrophic. During one year, between the two measures,\textsuperscript{9} 44\% of the children regressed and 15\% did not progress, which means that the results are less than satisfactory for 59\% of the children. And to make matters worse, these results are probably an underestimation of an already disappointing reality. The criteria used by the researcher to determine a child’s progress is a difference of 10 centile ranks between the two evaluations (Parent, 2008). Is moving from the 10th centile rank to the 20th centile rank considered significant progress? At this achievement level, a difference of this amount could only be an artifact of the measures used. Such a change has little significance in the classroom, and the child will continue to struggle with the same difficulties he had before the special education intervention. Thus, the percentage of children who have not really progressed and those who have regressed is probably far greater than the 60\% in Parent’s sample (2008).

Parent (2008) also paired struggling children who were not benefitting from special education services with those benefitting from them\textsuperscript{10} to measure the direct effect of pull-out services.

\textsuperscript{8} Shared reading is defined by Parent (2008) as “a text read by pupils with the special educator’s support.”

\textsuperscript{9} At the grade 1 level, the author compared the results of a phonemic awareness test given at the beginning of the school year to the results of a reading comprehension test given at the end of the school year. In grades 2 to 4, the author compares the results of a reading comprehension test given at the end of the school year to the results of a reading comprehension test given at the end of the previous year (e.g. grade 2 results in June compared to grade 3 results in June).

\textsuperscript{10} It may seem strange that a struggling child would not receive special
In grades 1 to 4, the non-benefitting children and those benefitting from pull-out services were equivalent at the start. In grade 1, the non-benefitting group of children finished the school year with a significantly higher level of achievement than those benefitting from special education services. At the end of the school year in grades 2 and 3, the level of achievement of those not benefitting from special education services is higher than those benefitting from the service, but the difference is not statistically significant. Finally, in grade 4, the achievement level for both groups is identical. In other words, this last analysis by Parent (2008), within the context of this study, shows that the special education service offered to struggling children appears not to have improved their achievement level, and for certain children, in particular those in grade 1, the special education intervention made their difficulties worse.

Despite these results of the efficiency of special education, some might argue that there are efficient special education programs, such as Reading Recovery, a very popular program in the English world (Australia, Canada, United States of America, New Zealand, etc.) This program appeared in Québec several years ago. What makes this program so popular?

---

education services. This is one of the many inconsistencies so often found in Québec, in both the French and English systems. The opposite is also true, children are referred to special education services when they should not be because they are not academically weak. This secret inconsistency, well known to those working in special education, was observed by Parent (2008) and by other authors (Saint-Laurent et al., 1996). Those with twisted minds might think that in light of the disturbing information discussed so far, children struggling with learning difficulties and not benefitting from special education services might be better off without these services.