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New summer school program at Brimfield yields good results

BRIMFIELD - Summer school here is still "Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic," but this year it was taught to the tune of balance and coordination exercises called "Cross Crawls," "Lazy 8's" and "Double Doodles."

Brimfield Grade School in cooperation with Options Center of East Peoria offered an unusual four-week summer program for grade school youngsters. The program, which concluded recently, blended traditional subjects of math, reading and computer assisted instruction in thinking skills with Char L phonics and Brain Gym® movement re-education programs.

Concerning the program, Helen Cox, the center's director, explains, "There appears to be a correlation between success in reading and thinking skills and other areas such as hand-eye coordination and balance.

"Many of our movement reeducation exercises help students to integrate the right and left hemispheres of the brain so that more effective learning can take place."

The basis for this approach was developed by Al Milliren, Ed.D., who has worked at Illinois State University and in private counseling practice in the Bloomington-Normal area.

According to Jim Griner, Brimfield Grade School principal, 23 pupils in grades one through four were served by the program.

Griner says, "We were initially acquainted with Mrs. Cox when she served as a school nurse some years ago. Then this spring, Brimfield staff members were given a presentation by the Options Center which outlined the Brain Gym® approach to learning and the Char-L approach to phonics. Teachers were so impressed that they agreed to incorporate this approach into the summer session."

Reading teacher assistant K. K. was enthusiastic about the program.

"In reading, the Char-L method we're using presents a systematic approach to teaching phonics by teaching patterns to decode words," K. K. says. "The students are very receptive to it. They get very excited when they find they can recognize words that before were unknown to them."

Structured teaching manuals accompanied the program, which made it easy for teachers to implement.

The program yielded very positive results, according to Griner.

At the conclusion of the summer - session, results on the diagnostic screening test administered to students indicated a 1.05 overall average gain grade equivalent in reading and a 0.73 overall average gain grade equivalent in math during the four week period of instruction.

Griner says, "The results are very impressive and very gratifying. In addition to results

measured by the tests, we have also seen some other very positive outcomes. The children were excited and enthusiastic about learning, and many of the parents reported increased levels of self-control and cooperation from the children at home."

D. S., a Brimfield teacher, explains, "The children were active in learning. The small groups: were excellent ... No one could just sit there and get away with it. It was a moving experience."

On the last day of the program, teacher A.L. adds, "My disbeliefs (for the program approach), have changed to praise in terms of the results I have seen."

L. B., Brimfield first-grade teacher who was responsible for math during the summer program, notes, "I feel we are using a good approach. It definitely appears to be doing what we set out to do, and that is improve math, reading and thinking skills of our students. In math, not only have I seen improvement in mastery of skills introduced in the past, but I am also seeing mastery of new skills in only a few weeks. "Here I am, for example, introducing multiplication to second graders, and they are saying 'Great! Give me more!'"

One of Option Center's basic texts is Brain-Gym® by Paul E. Dennison, Ph.D., and Gail E. Dennison. According to Helen, learning takes place best when there is an integrated approach between mind and body. Brain-Gym® offers a wide variety of activities and exercises to achieve this integration.

Helen says, "One of the things we did at Brimfield was to assess students' attitudes toward learning as well as their brain dominance and learning style prior to the summer session. The Brain-Gym® activities can be applied to a wide range of students of different ages and learning styles."

Parents and students are enthusiastic about the program's new approach to learning.

B. K. is the mother of two summer school participants, Brian, 8, and Aimee, 7. She says, "It's really amazing to me what the program has done. My children were really eager to go to school each day...." "When my children would come home with exercises to do, I'd ask the purpose, and they would reply that the teacher told them to do it. Now I realize the coordination exercises are to get both sides of their brain working well together."

While the approach is relatively new, Helen says several schools across the country are incorporating Brain Gym® into their curriculum. Griner sees many of the techniques used by the summer school staff being carried on into Brimfield primary classrooms this fall.

"Based upon the results of the summer program, I believe we will see more emphasis on thinking skills as well as techniques such as small group and computer assisted instruction applied throughout the curriculum. Also, as word-of-mouth carries the message of the progress our students experienced with Brain Gym® and Char-L phonics, I think we will see aspects of those programs being used as well." Griner said.