

The Immersion Model: Teaching Reading in a Neuroeducational Classroom

by Jessica Robins Miller

At the Wolf School, we have developed a unique method to teach reading that has been successful with very complex learners. Through the combination of language and sensory modulation strategies embedded into individualized reading programming and based upon the students' learning styles, students learn to read when they previously failed. Our students make gains in their reading scores annually, and some students' reading abilities have soared as many as one to two grade levels in one academic year. Our immersion of therapeutic application and intervention into the academic goals has yielded these results.

The Wolf School was founded in 1999 in response to the challenge many schools faced trying to educate children who are complex learners with multiple learning differences. Wolf students have average or above average cognitive potential, but they experience enormous difficulty progressing in a traditional classroom due to a learning profile that includes language processing and production challenges, significant sensory integration problems, and ineffective social communication.

Following the standards of core grade-level skills for language arts, math, social studies, and science, our curriculum encompasses a rigorous blend of academic subjects and intensive therapeutic supports that address these learning challenges. In contrast to a pull-out model where students receive speech or occupational therapy services separate from the academic curriculum, the Wolf School created an immersion model whereby therapeutic support is embedded within the entire curriculum throughout the day to ensure optimal learning.

The immersion model utilizes a team of professionals (i.e., academic teacher, speech pathologist, and occupational therapist) working with small instructional groups to ensure that academic lessons integrate language, sensory, and social skills. Classrooms are small (6 to 10 children) and the student/faculty ratio is 4:1.

While classroom teachers are responsible for setting the curriculum and monitoring academic progress, mixed-ability groupings for reading are co-planned and co-taught with speech/language pathologists and occupational therapists. Specific language and occupational therapy services are embedded into the reading curriculum in addition to the direct teaching of reading. For example, during the two 60-minute language arts blocks, students rotate through small instructional groups in 20-minute intervals taught by a teacher, occupational or speech and language therapist.

The content of the lesson is thereby taught through the lens of the different professionals, creating optimal learning opportunities for our students. Speech and language pathologists develop a language-rich environment in both individual and group settings, and provide direct reading instruction in small groups. Therapists evaluate the pre-reading and reading needs of each student and incorporate the language-based needs into the specialized instruction on an ongoing basis.

To address sensory issues, Wolf provides a myriad of movement activities that maximize students' arousal and attention levels and has a positive impact on organizational skills. By beginning each day with sensory processing skill building through our Wolf School "Move to Learn" program, and by providing movement activities every 90 minutes (i.e., rotating movement stations in the classroom), we have provided an environment for each student's academic readiness. This enables the student to achieve a readiness state for learning, develop an ability to reflect on what he or she needs to learn, and create a "just right" awareness to achieve attention and focus for reading instruction. Our occupational therapists support the development of self-regulation and sensory processing abilities, and also teach strategies to enhance social competencies and academic independence. This unique educational approach allows Wolf students to be ready to listen, attend to task, and be prepared to learn.

Learning to read is the best foundation for success in school. In addition, literacy development is critical in addressing the needs of complex learners and early literacy is positively correlated to increased academic achievement and reduced high school drop-out rates. The Wolf's School approach to teaching reading allows children, who have previously struggled, to make significant academic gains that improve their present and future quality of life.

Jessica Robins Miller is the Head of the Wolf School in East Providence, Rhode Island. The Wolf School was founded in 1999 in response to children who are more complex learners with multiple learning differences. Wolf currently educates 50 children in grades 1–8 from Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. Wolf is approved by the Rhode Island Department of Education as an Independent School and is an approved Special Education Private School in Rhode Island and Massachusetts.