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Book Review

Beginning Reading: a balanced approach to literacy instruction during the first three years

by Yola Center (Allen & Unwin 2005, ISBN 1 74114 639 9, *Paperback*,

RRP \$A39.95)

Christine Weckert
University of Newcastle

With the so-called 'whole language versus explicit phonics instruction' debate again gaining currency in Australia, Yola Center's claim to provide a 'balanced approach' to literacy instruction promises welcome relief for those educators looking for some middle ground. Indeed, Center reminds the reader on numerous occasions throughout her book that she has drawn upon 'converging research' into early literacy development. At the same time, however, the author admits that her view of reading is 'ostensibly reductionist', a confession that is supported by the extensive list of references consulted to produce the text and the heavy emphasis on systematic, explicit teaching of phonological and phonemic awareness, and phonics. This contradiction sums up the enigmatic nature of this book as a whole.

Center begins with an explanation of the differences between speaking and reading, arguing that reading cannot be caught and therefore must be taught. She then goes on to outline literacy programs for the first three years of school. While explicit teaching of decoding skills is the major focus of these programs, there are chapters on use of different types of text and the teaching of cognitive and meta-cognitive comprehension strategies. However, recommended texts for guided reading in the first year of school are 'decodable' texts with controlled vocabulary designed to present children with only (or almost only) the sounds explicitly taught. Center advises that 'quality literature' in the form of 'levelled readers' should also be present in the classroom, although it is not clear how and when these should be used. Neither is it clear why Center has chosen to focus on only 'imaginative' texts during the first year of school and to leave introduction of other types of text until the second year.

While the 'balance' in these chapters can be questioned, they do provide some useful insights for teacher education students and teachers into the English phonological and graphological systems. There is a useful explanation of the difference between phonological and phonemic awareness in Chapter 4 (pp.39-40). The glossary of some terms commonly used by literacy educators is also a useful inclusion.

Although the major focus of the book is on the teaching of reading, Center does highlight the interdependence of the reading and writing processes. However, the sections on teaching writing do not provide guidelines as explicit or as systematic as those on the teaching of reading. Following Juel et al. (1986) and Trieman (1993; 1998), Center argues that the symbiotic relationship between reading and spelling calls for spelling to be taught at the same time as word recognition strategies for reading and thus includes a chapter on teaching spelling. Although relatively brief, this chapter presents an informative discussion of the teaching of phonological, morphological, orthographic and etymological strategies for spelling. The list of orthographic constraints adapted from Trieman (1993) provides useful insights for teacher education students and teachers into the ways written English doesn't work.

Center rightly stresses the crucial role of both formative and summative assessment of children's learning in the teaching/learning cycle. However, it is puzzling that no assessment is recommended to ascertain the language and literacy knowledge children bring with them when they first start school. Instead, Center recommends systematic teaching of listening comprehension and phonological awareness, in addition to story reading and retelling, for the first six weeks of school before 'formal literacy' instruction begins.

The final two chapters are devoted to assessment and intervention. In the first of these, assessment strategies related to teaching and learning activities not mentioned in the relevant earlier chapters on the first year of school are outlined. For instance, reference is made to use of retellings of informational and procedural texts. The majority of the final chapter is devoted to a discussion of research into the effectiveness of the Reading Recovery program. Center concludes that this intervention program is more effective when used in conjunction with the SWELL program of which she is one of the authors.

This book would be a reader-friendly text for teacher education students. In general, arguments are clearly presented and personal anecdotes help to bring a feeling of reality to the points Center makes. However, scattered through the text are unsubstantiated generalisations such as the claims that most Kindergarten [first year of school in NSW] children will have had little experience with writing (page 32) and that Reading Recovery has caused a resistance to the provision of individualised assistance in Kindergarten classes (page 59).

Given the current climate in literacy education in Australia and the recent federal government's inquiry into the pre-service preparation of primary school teachers in relation to literacy teaching, the more cynical reader could be forgiven for believing that there is another agenda at work here. This view could be supported by Center's anecdotes about pre-service training not preparing young teachers to cater for children with reading difficulties and her inferences that so-called 'scientific' research is the only valid type of research.

References

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