

Book Review

Balanced Literacy Essentials: Weaving Theory into Practice for Successful Instruction in Reading, Writing, and Talk

Michelann Parr and Terry Campbell
Markham, ON: Pembroke, 2012

Reviewed by: Jon Reyhner
Northern Arizona University

This short book of 144 pages has a lot of ideas for teachers of reading who want to actively engage their students, especially at the elementary level. However, it is woefully short on both theory and research. The authors identify what they consider “10 literacy essentials” in 10 chapters and see themselves as “fellow travelers and collaborators, co-constructing knowledge as we explore and learn together” (p. 131). This sort of thinking, that eschews research has been criticised by the advocates of a phonics approach to teaching reading, the congressionally chartered National Reading Panel and the Reading First provisions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 in the United States. However, the National Reading Panel’s and NCLB’s phonics emphasis has been countered by advocates of a comprehension focus to teaching reading (e.g., Reyhner & Hurtado, 2008).

Most of Parr and Campbell’s recommended classroom activities, such as read alouds, where the teacher reads a story to students and then questions and discusses the story, and followup and literacy centres where small groups of students are provided a variety of literacy-related activities are familiar to advocates of a *whole language* approach to reading, though the term does not appear in the book’s index. While there is mention of the social nature of reading and writing, there is no mention of Smith’s (1988) *literacy club* and only a little of the thinking that supports this important concept. Many of the ideas in Parr and Campbell’s book fit constructivist learning theory but again, the term does not appear in the index, and there is little to no discussion of constructivist, behaviorist, or other learning theories that might support the variety of classroom literacy activities advocated by the authors. The authors do mention that “[e]mergent and struggling speakers, readers, and writers, including English Language Learners, require the use of explicit instruction and effective strategies to enhance oral language” (p. 42). Elsewhere, they give a list of activities that “have proven to be effective with students who struggle with reading” (p. 78). However, there is no in-depth discussion to follow up this statement or research cited to support the listed activities.

Each chapter shows how specific works of children’s literature can be used to actively engage students. Every chapter ends with a useful list of other children’s books that teachers could use to engage their students. However, when interesting topics appear, such as using “accountable talk” (p. 41), where students are asked to elaborate their answers to questions and explain their reasoning behind them, they are not discussed in any depth.

The audience for this book is teachers who could use ideas for a variety of literacy activities to motivate their students. There is no real help in this book for a teacher wanting to follow Parr and Campbell's teaching suggestions who is confronted by administrators, other teachers, or parents who say theory and research support phonics drills and a skills approach to teaching reading. The authors should either drop the word theory from their title or include more discussion of it in any future edition.

References

- Reyhner, J., & Hurtado, D. S. (2008). Reading first, literacy, and American Indian students. *Journal of American Indian Education, 47*(1), 82-95.
- Smith, F. (1988). *Joining the literacy club: Further essays into education*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Jon Reyhner is Professor of bilingual multicultural education at Northern Arizona University. He holds an Ed.D. in Elementary Curriculum and Instruction from Montana State University. His particular interest is Aboriginal education and how reading was taught to Aboriginal students in residential schools. He has published two books with the University of Oklahoma Press, *American Indian Education: A History* and *Teaching American Indian Students*.