
NEW PUBLICATIONS

NUWE PUBLIKASIES

Michael Pressley. 1998. *Reading Instruction That Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching*. New York: The Guildford Press, 1998. (Paperback, 298 pp.)

One of the greatest challenges facing South Africa is the need to ensure that more children are successful in the early years of schooling. Ensuring that literacy teaching is efficient and effective will be a critical determinant in meeting that challenge.

Michael Pressley's book provides a comprehensive account of current approaches internationally, with particular emphasis on American practices. Debates on reading instruction in recent years have been characterised by polarisation of the supporters of whole language and the supporters of a skills-based approach (phonics-based). From the outset, Pressley makes his belief in an eclectic approach or what has come to be known as balanced literacy clear. Refreshingly, however, he is not concerned to win his case by presenting a distorted view of other approaches.

South African readers will find that in his analyses of both whole language and skills-based approaches, he is careful to present the merits of these approaches. At the same time, he does not hesitate to offer firm criticism.

Researchers and teacher educators will find that the material in the book has been carefully and comprehensively researched. At the same time, because the writing is lucid and coherent, making it accessible to those who would find many books on the subject far too technical. The chapters each have an introduction which clearly outlines the contents of the chapter and a summary at the end. In addition each of the sections within chapters has a summary, making it easy to follow the argument.

The book is divided into nine chapters. The first chapter explores whole language. Pressley remarks wryly that

there is an obvious culprit when their child does not learn to read in school. They believe that their son or daughter is the victim of the reading approach currently in favor. In the 1990s that approach has been whole language. (p. 10)

He argues strongly that there have been positive results from practice which is characterised by immersion in print and writing. For him, proponents of whole language, like Constance Weaver, have been instrumental in encouraging teachers to give learners the time and opportunities they need to practice literacy. This includes encouraging learners to reflect on their errors and thus construct new understandings about reading and writing. There is clearly a strong case for quality literature and authentic reading and writing experiences. However,

Pressley also identifies some of the anomalies and even contradictions in whole language practice. He is particularly critical of what he sees as a fundamental flaw in thinking. Based on a belief that good readers use semantic and syntactic cues to a much greater extent than letter-level cues to recognise words, whole language proponents argue that systematic instruction in phonic skills is not necessary. Weaver (1994) is among those who go as far as to argue that the source of difficulties in learning to read can be found in the teaching of phonics.

Perhaps Pressley's criticism is a little harsh. As he points out, one can not really speak about **the** whole language approach. The study done by Bergeron (1990) shows that there is little agreement even with respect to definition of the basic premises, and even less on the instructional techniques and strategies to be used. Therefore, it is possible for Routman (cited on page 36) to argue that teachers who do not teach phonics, have seriously misunderstood whole language .

Chapter 2 provides a useful account of skilled reading, which emphasises the need to be able to process efficiently. Practice includes the development of conscious, active processing of text. Both lower order (e.g. decoding) and higher order (interpretative and evaluative) processes are involved. A particularly valuable part of this chapter is the summary of the analysis of skilled reading undertaken by Pressley and Afferbach (1995). This emphasises that though good reading depends on an interaction between top-down and bottom-up processing, this does not preclude the targeting of comprehension strategies.

Other valuable insights that Pressley offers on the basis of research findings are that speed reading instruction and attempts to modify eye movements are at best misguided.

The third chapter provides a comprehensive overview of children's reading problems. The conclusions that he reaches have particular implications for South African education. He emphasises the need for systematic intensive instruction in decoding (e.g. letter-sound associations and the blending of such sounds to produce words). It seems that research evidence points to poor readers relying on semantic-contextual cues. Poor readers often activate irrelevant meanings of words, because they lack prior knowledge. They also appear to be unable to apply knowledge that they do have appropriately. In some cases, inability to read is caused by biological factors such as low intelligence and developmental dyslexia.

Implicit in this chapter are some of the problems children face through inadequate or inappropriate schooling. South African readers would have liked to have seen a review of the literature relating to children in bilingual or multilingual communities, as well as the insights available to us through the work of Heath (1983) and Gee (1990).

Chapters 4 to 7 explore the literature on the development of literacy. Chapter 4 is subtitled *Before Reading Instruction Begins*. Here the importance of parent-child interaction is emphasised. It is vital that South African educators follow the lead of countries like the USA, Britain and Holland in developing the ability of parents to interact with their children more productively and in ways that are appropriately responsive. In his concern for systemic instruction leading to phonemic awareness, Pressley may be underestimating the importance for children to develop phonemic awareness through engagement with texts characterised by what the Mem Fox describes as "rhyme, rhythm and repetition" (personal communication).

Chapter 5 focuses on the progression from not being able to read words at all. Of particular interest here is Pressley's, discussion of the need to strike a balance between natural development (literacy activities) and systematic instruction. The implications are clear: South African grade 1 classrooms must meet the essential requirements of being print-rich environment, and places where systematic teaching of skills is done. While Curriculum 2005 does emphasise the need for authentic practice, it is short on systematic teaching. Furthermore, despite the financial obstacles, schools will have to be in a position to provide the necessary resources.

Pressley makes it clear that there are many areas that require further research before there is sufficient evidence to decide on questions such as whether short or long vowels should be taught first, whether vowels or consonants should be taught first, or whether the alphabet or sounds should be used in letter identification.

Ruth Wharton-McDonald and Jennifer Mistretta Hampston were co-authors with Pressley of Chapter 6 which focuses on primary-level teachers in America who were considered to be exceptional teachers. "Exceptional" here was defined by the positive effects on the literacy achievement of their learners. All of them followed a balanced approach to literacy teaching, i.e. they immersed learners in authentic literature and writing experiences and provided systematic skills instruction (in context and decontextualised). Their learners were engaged in doing reading or writing or closely related activities in an integrated approach to learning for much of the time.

Chapter 7 (*The Need for Increased Comprehension in Upper Elementary Grades*) examines Grades 4 and 5 and provides a strong argument for balancing skills instruction and more authentic reading and writing. Pressley and his co-author Wharton-MacDonald argue for an instructional system known as "transactional strategies instruction". This suggestion would be in line with a constructivist, outcomes-based approach to learning since it fosters self-regulation. As yet, there has not been much research into its effectiveness. It would appear to be important for us to do research in South Africa as well.

Chapter 8 (*Motivation and Literacy*) makes interesting reading. It is clear that the policy documents for Curriculum 2005 are based on similar findings:

Nothing motivates like successful accomplishment of appropriate and challenging tasks (p. 257)

Chapter 9, the concluding chapter reiterates the need for more research. Concerned for learners for whom learning is not an osmotic process and for whom discovery does not result in certain cognitive development, Pressley urges the use of balanced literacy:

a balancing of whole language and skills components seems more defensible than instruction that is only immersion in reading and writing (p. 265).

But he is concerned for ongoing research to be done and for his own work to be subjected to constructive critical review:

I am confident that much revealing reading instructional research is yet to come. Thus the conclusions offered in this book, are, for the time being, subject to revision in light of new evidence. (p. 284)

I consider this book to be a valuable contribution to teacher education. It should be on the prescribed list for all students intending to teach at a primary school, and is essential reading for all those involved in teacher support services.

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