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Book Review

Reading and Teaching: A Book About Learning

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The series editors, Daniel Liston and Ken Zeichner, tell us that the book *Reading and Teaching* is designed to help teachers engage with “crucial issues that all teachers need to address.” I believe they are right. This book does not offer simple solutions, bulleted lists of recommendations, or formulas for becoming a star teacher. This book makes you think good and hard about being a literacy educator and lays bare the complexities of teaching literacy well.

The authors, Richard Meyer and Maryann Manning, escort us on a phenomenal journey through four very different literacy classrooms. On the way, we meet not only the teachers of these four classrooms but a remarkable group of colleagues who reflect on the classroom scenarios, connect scenarios to their own teaching experiences, and ask tough questions about what is best for children. Each classroom is complex and the journey is compelling; we recognize the strengths of the various programs as well as their dangers.

The first classroom we enter is taught by Penny, a second grade, European American teacher. Penny is in her first year of teaching and generally relies on a basal reader to guide instruction in her classrooms. She often reads from the text following its suggestions and asking her students the scripted questions. Penny describes the confidence that the basal reader provides as she moves through her first year of teaching. At the end of the year, Penny is pleased that her children have scored well on the school’s assessment. As with all the scenarios in the book, Penny’s story is followed

by a transcript from a teacher discussion group in which teachers discuss the scenario and reflect on their own teaching. Finally, a summary is presented that raises and examines issues from the case. No judgment is offered relative to Penny’s teaching or the basal reader she uses. The goal is discussion not evaluation “we do take a stance on reading process and instruction, but we do not offer simplistic resolutions to the conflicts around reading” (p. xxi). Paramount to the authors’ stance on reading instruction is the need for reflection and thoughtful inquiry and this is how they envision this book being used

The second case describes Sylvia, a first-year, first grade teacher who worked to create a classroom that was culturally relevant and responsive to her students. Over the course of her first year of teaching, Sylvia accesses cultural practices from her own Hispanic family and community to engage her Hispanic students. She incorporated *platicas*, informal group story telling, and *consejos*, the use of stories to influence student behavior and attitudes. In addition, she used her knowledge of the community to make strong connections with families. Sylvia’s case explores the possibilities offered by making literacy instruction culturally relevant and responsive.

Kendra is a European American first grade teacher who describes herself as a whole language teacher. Her scenario presents the various whole language practices that contribute to her literacy program. Kendra’s day includes a planned activity time during which children interact with each other at

various learning centers, a group time when children share a book, poem, or song, and personal reading time when children select increasingly complex texts to read over the course of the school year. In addition, their days involve literacy centers, writing experiences, and literature circles. Finally, the children participate in an “explorers club” that involves conducting research on issues of interest to the children. They engage in interviews, experiments, and web and library searches.

The fourth case introduces us to Janesse, an African American middle-school teacher with nine years of teaching experience. Janesse plans her reading curriculum based on her students’ interests and experiences. She is careful to choose texts that her students can appreciate and consistently connects texts to political and social issues that her students encounter in their lives. Her students are involved in conversations about privilege, power, money, race, gender, segregation, and language. In Janesse’s classroom real-life issues are the content for reading and writing activities and opportunities.

Each of these cases presents a different conception of literacy instruction and each of

the cases is followed by a thoughtful conversation among colleagues. The book closes with a discussion of three literacy instruction practices (direct instruction, whole language and critical literacy) asking readers to reflect on issues such as how reading is defined within each view, the roles of teachers and the students, and the ways reading is assessed. The authors challenge teachers to carefully consider the decisions that they make in their own classrooms.

This book is a wonderful resource for teachers to read together and discuss. Each case raises issues that are sure to spark insightful conversations. The authors suggest that teachers read each case and then role-play the group discussions that follow the cases. The real-life scenarios alongside thoughtful conversations are certain to inspire rich and productive thinking. Simple solutions are not offered, but thoughtful insights that recognize the complexity of teaching are. As an experienced literacy educator, I am constantly and consistently struck by the complexity of literacy learning and not its simplicity. This book provides a powerful means for exploring that complexity.