

Literacy at the crossroads: Crucial talk about reading, writing, and other teaching dilemmas.

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Literacy at the Crossroads: Crucial Talk About Reading, Writing, and Other Teaching Dilemmas

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Literacy at the Crossroads: Crucial Talk About Reading, Writing, and Other Teaching Dilemmas

Regie Routman (1996)

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

Pp. xviii + 222

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US \$19.50

Regie Routman set out to write a political book when she wrote *Literacy at the Crossroads*. She was writing about the political challenges facing teachers and their students, and the role of teachers in overcoming these challenges. This well-written, and even heartening, book is a must-read for all teachers and those who care about the future of our schools. Her portrayal describes the political challenges facing them and offers practical suggestions for overcoming, and more importantly, winning over these critics, or at least the parents of their students.

The book consists of three parts. The first part, "Dealing with the Politics of Education," examines the political challenges facing teachers and offers practical suggestions for overcoming, and more importantly, winning over these critics, or at least the parents of their students. This examination relates three cases of failed and successful school innovations and offers practical suggestions for overcoming, and more importantly, winning over these critics, or at least the parents of their students. The section concludes with proposals for different

teachers arming themselves with the facts and listening to, communicating with, and involving parents. "Teaching Dilemmas," portrays some central educational controversies confronting language learners. "Empowerment for Life," the final part, proposes different ways for teachers and students to lead their education. She concludes this section by challenging teachers to lead the type of

Literacy at the Crossroads is not one-sided or narrowly ideological. It does not engage in language polarization. Instead it is a considered and principled response to the politicizing of literacy. Since the publisher, Heineman, is a leading publisher of whole language books, this is a less well-balanced book. What we get is a book which answers the critics of whole language with classroom-based examples, Routman shows how the whole language approach does the deal more, in providing the type of education parents and citizens want for their children. She provides measured educational debate is politicized, suggestions which ESL professionals might find useful if they are involved in debates on bilingual education, Ebonics, or the English Only movement. The basic approach to the critics, revealing what is actually happening in classrooms, explaining how what is happening affects worried individuals, and speaking knowledgeably about educational issues. She argues that teachers are learners, and where students can attain competence and self-respect, "speaking out, knowing the research, writing proposals, experimenting in [their] own classrooms with local and national audiences" (p. 165). This approach demands that teachers become responsible representatives of their profession, not simply communicating in the language of the parents and students.

Routman directs some criticism at teachers who claim to be whole language, but who fail to do so. She does not exclude phonics or the teaching of spelling. Phonics is a part of learning to read, and acquiring literacy; thus phonics should be part of whole language teachers' repertoires. To some education departments fail to train their teachers in phonics. Furthermore, she points out that the truly learning disabled, need the intensive phonics training espoused by the phonics supporters. She also teaches spelling while also honoring the early invented spellings, which she points out relevant to becoming a literate user of the language. To support this progression, she supplies guidelines for encouraging students to become good spellers. These eight guidelines encourage attention to spelling. She further argues for explicit modeling and showing students how to do something when the

Since this is not an ESL book per se, nor does it delve into research or questions concerning assessment, some might decide not to read the book. This decision would deprive them of the opportunity to see a different perspective not that different from those faced by ESL professionals. We need only to consider the different emphases. Furthermore, many issues that Routman raises about assessment, modeling literacy, and spelling are out of current ESL discussions. Not only does she offer suggestions for the classroom, but she also offers sound suggestions for developing and

materials and ideas and through joining support groups. Just as importantly, she examines how research support a new teacher needs to the ongoing support teachers need to re-envision their classrooms.

The final section of *Literacy at the Crossroads* shares with the readers the importance of teacher research and how research has informed her teaching. More importantly, she shows how doing such research can empower the classroom by enabling teachers to practice and model the inquiry and reflection process.

A final reason for picking up this non-ESL book is that, like other books written by committed teacher-researchers (Paley, 1986, 1992) or about such teachers (Kidder, 1989), the book reminds us of why people become teachers. There is no library of books like this for ESL teachers, books that richly portray the lives of various teachers and the various problems they face. Without such a library we need to rely on books such as *Teacher* (Ashton-Warner, 1963). Perhaps, as ESL as a field commits itself to teacher research and its many possibilities, books like this are needed. At that time, we need voices reminding us of what we can do and providing visions of possibilities.

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