

Sometimes reading is hard: Using decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies to inspire fluent, passionate, and lifelong readers

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Sometimes reading is hard: Using decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies to inspire fluent, passionate, and lifelong readers

by Robin Bright

Pembroke Publishers, 2021, 176 pages

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Robin Bright pulls no punches about the focus of her book *Sometimes reading is hard: Using decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies to inspire fluent, passionate, and lifelong readers*. She begins by stating that it is hard work for students to learn to read and for teachers to learn to *teach* reading. She alludes to the fact that, even though it may be work, teachers have a responsibility to help each student on the reading journey because “not being able to read is like being barred from a members-only club – many aspects of life are off limits” (Bright, 2021, p. 6). While we may want quick fixes, Bright articulates that learning how to teach reading is a career-long journey with few shortcuts. Grounded in such foundational thoughts, this reading pedagogy resource is usable and accessible for preservice to accomplished teachers who want to improve their teaching practices to motivate students to become life-long readers (Bright, 2021).

After an introductory chapter focusing on nine considerations for teaching reading, chapters two through five are organized around the established fundamentals of reading: decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Alberta Education, 2022; National

Reading Panel, 2000). She provides literature-based definitions, assessment strategies, examples of what does and does not work when teaching the fundamentals, and a bulleted recap of the takeaway concepts. Each key strategy is clearly titled and includes teaching tips and step-by-step planning instructions that are realistic for implementation in an elementary classroom. Each of these key strategies is current and relevant. For example, one section in chapter two focuses on getting older readers decoding; a common theme that is being seen by more and more upper-level teachers (Moats, 2020). Chapter six concludes the resource with tips on how to inspire students to sustain the reading journey and where the future path of teaching reading might possibly lead. All chapters are packed with classroom-tested examples informed by Bright's experience working with teachers, researchers, administrators, literacy consultants, and preservice teachers.

In her introductory chapter, aptly named *What do you mean I have to teach reading?*, she discusses nine philosophical considerations on what matters most when teaching reading: “1) sometimes reading is hard, 2) structures of language support reading instruction, 3) components of reading need to be taught daily, 4) every teacher is a reading teacher, 5) meaningful relationships are key, 6) students need good reasons to read, 7) teachers must be readers, 8) reading engagement leads to capable, passionate lifelong readers, and 9) reading skills and motivation factors are synergistic” (Bright, 2021, p. 13). Chapter two focuses on decoding as the first fundamental. Bright speaks about the importance of explicitly teaching decoding skills to students of all ages using just-right and own-choice books in guided and shared reading groups. Fluency is tackled next in chapter three, beginning with debunking fluency as only about speed at the cost of comprehension. She speaks about the perils of round robin reading from a student and teacher point of view while focusing on the benefits of collaborative reading strategies such as pair or group reading, choral reading, poetry academy, or readers theatre. Chapter four describes the importance of developing a rich vocabulary on the reading journey. She describes it as “the word-rich get richer, the word-poor get poorer” where the gap between these groups of students will continue to grow if vocabulary is not taught as a reading fundamental (Bright, 2021, p. 95). In the penultimate chapter, Bright describes the importance of comprehension and situates it not only as the ability to understand the text but as a mindset of being confident and motivated to read. She discusses key strategies for elementary, middle, and high school levels, including going on a field trip to promote relevancy of content, developing book clubs, and seeking out mentor texts for all levels of students.

Her description of how to teach the practices of good readers is well-defined and supported by real-world examples. In the final chapter of this resource, Bright talks about how the reading journey can be set in motion with “one book that changes everything” (Bright, 2021, p. 148). She supports the importance of putting such books in the hands of students by sharing appropriate literature lists, ideas of how to incorporate picture books, and ways to build an interesting and diverse classroom library. A short conclusion brings the reader back full circle to the idea that learning to read and learning to teach reading is hard but worth it if it empowers a child for life.

For me, as a post-secondary English Language Arts pedagogy instructor, the book’s only weakness is the lack of a critical analysis framework through which to view commercial reading programs. In early grades, new teachers are often mandated a reading program but do not have the skills to analyze if it is worthy of teaching to the students. While this may be out of the purview of this resource, a section on how to critically analyze any reading program would be a welcome and useful addition, particularly if this resource is to be used in preservice teacher education.

Nevertheless, the strengths of this teaching resource are plentiful. Numerous examples of what each strategy looks like in a real classroom are sprinkled throughout the resource. For example, in chapter three, a story about Joseph, a slow but competent reader, illustrates her point that fluency is not only about speed. These examples help novice and accomplished teachers lift these strategies from the page and place them in their classrooms. Also sprinkled throughout Bright’s work are references to accessible and diverse books. She focuses on more extensive literature lists in chapter five, but I appreciate the immediate linkage of ideas and plans to literature that teachers can immediately incorporate in the classroom. Bright’s introduction of the idea of writing and reading as symbiotic and simultaneous is particularly important for new teachers as reading and writing are sometimes mistaken as separate entities. Finally, the consistent inclusion of quick teaching tips and step-by-step plans in each chapter clinches its usefulness for all levels of literacy teachers. The quick teaching tips, located in bold on the side of most pages, supply concise ideas or impactful quotes from reading researchers. The step-by-step plans are particularly important as they show the minutiae of how to incorporate these ideas; such detail is often not included in such texts, leaving busy teachers to have to ascertain what this would look like in the classroom. Teachers at all levels will appreciate this field-tested resource that includes practical examples and evidence-based

research. Bright's book is a cornucopia of ideas, practices, strategies, and stories to inspire teachers at all levels to commit to empowering a child with the skill of reading.

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