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Book Review: Thinking Tools for Young Readers and Writers

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Book Review: *Thinking Tools for Young Readers and Writers*

Overview

Olson, Bailius, McCourtney, and Widtmann (2018) wrote *Thinking tools for young readers and writers: strategies to promote higher literacy in grades 2-8* with classroom teachers, literacy specialists, undergraduate and graduate literacy education students and researchers in mind. The book begins with an explanation of cognitive strategies, defining them as the thinking tools students use to understand what they are reading. The authors discuss why teachers of grades 2-8 should take a cognitive strategies approach to promote higher literacy in their students. Carol Booth Olson presents the cognitive strategies tool kit, where teachers introduce students to these thinking tools within their mental reader's and writer's tool kits.

For each tool, or strategy (e.g., planning, goal setting, tapping prior knowledge, asking questions, making predictions, making connections, summarizing, inferencing, forming interpretations, adopting an alignment, monitoring, and clarifying), Olson presents current research, connections to Common Core State Standards, and examples of classroom lessons putting the strategies to use. She collaborated with three teachers, Angie Balius, Emily McCourtney, and Mary Widtmann, who are all affiliated with the National Writing Project, and who serve as the source of the classroom lessons.

Carol Booth Olson divides the book into five sections: (1) why use thinking tools to promote higher literacy in grades 2-8; (2) best practices in reading and writing instruction for students in grades 2-8; (3) reading and writing narrative texts; (4) reading and writing informative/expository texts; and (5) reading and writing opinion, persuasive, interpretive, and argumentative texts. In the first two sections, Olson, et al., provide the reader with background information, reading and writing standards, and what students are expected to know and be able to

do in grades 2-8 according to state standards and national assessments. They note the complexity of reading and writing skills and how difficult critical thinking can be for students.

The authors' claims about best practice for reading and writing instruction are supported by current research. For example, they cite Gambrell, Malloy, Marinak, and Mazzoni (2015) for both their argument that instruction and assessment should be backed by evidenced-based practice and for their recommendations of comprehensive literacy practices. Then, they cited Graham, Harris, and Chambers (2015) for their recommendations of effective instructional practices. The second half of the book, sections 3-5, presents reading and writing instructional ideas for teaching various genres along with research and rationale for why these types of text should be taught. The skills students use to read and write informative/expository texts will be different than those they use to read and write narrative texts (Duke & Roberts, 2010).

Teachers will find the research, resources, and ideas shared valuable for developing strong readers and writers. Olson encourages teachers to support their students in learning to “think BIG” or be strategic in how they put their thinking tools to use (p. 5). By giving students the tools, or cognitive strategies, to think about what they are reading, students have various ways to understand and interpret text and the world around them. Ultimately, these tools will support students in becoming better readers and writers. Through classroom activities and lessons, students are taught what each tool/strategy is and how to use that tool to construct meaning. These strategies are taught along with decoding and encoding skills and as a result, students make substantial growth throughout the year. The authors present their framework through teacher instruction in the areas of building community, developing vocabulary and grammar, and reading and writing in a variety of genre.

Building Community

The notion of starting the school year off by building a community of learners so students, “develop a sense of ownership in their learning,” is not new (p. 30). The authors cite several researchers on the importance of community, including Robert Ruddell (1995) and Gambrell et al. (2015), who both wrote about motivation and the importance of students being a part of a classroom community. Olson et al. want students to enjoy reading and urge teachers to connect reading and writing and to create opportunities for students to engage in book club discussions where students choose their own books. These literacy components are a crucial part of any successful classroom, especially if teachers want their students to take risks and be engaged as learners.

Developing Vocabulary and Grammar

Carol Booth Olson demonstrates the importance of providing students with explicit vocabulary instruction, as it is a significant factor in better understanding texts. Explicit vocabulary instruction gives students opportunities to engage with new vocabulary in various ways. Many educators are not sure where to begin with teaching new vocabulary and often resort back to their own experiences by giving students a list and having them memorize words and their meanings. Olson, Bailius, McCourtney, and Widtmann share several lessons for involving students in learning new vocabulary. They cite Baumann, Kame’enui, & Ash (2003) for their research on role of vocabulary knowledge in comprehension development and share a list of elements frequently included in explicit instruction, as suggested by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000). The book includes photographs of student work to help teachers visualize the activities and further support their understanding of how the lessons might look. The example lessons offer suggestions on how to make learning vocabulary fun and engaging. The authors similarly give the research

and rationale behind teaching grammar explicitly and provide teachers with guidance on how to do this in a way that helps students understand and use correct grammar in their writing.

Reading and Writing in a Variety of Genre

Students need explicit instruction in diverse genres to improve their reading comprehension and writing skills. Olson explains the importance of teaching about reading and writing narrative texts, stating, “Narratives represent shared understandings of human experience... essential in communicating real-life experiences” (p. 81). In the book, the authors quote Ann Mechem Ziergiebel (2013) as saying, “Whether stories are read or written in school or out of school, students become engaged and motivated by just a turn of a phrase, a voice, an image, or a character, conflict, setting, or theme” (p.140) to support the idea learning about narratives motivates students to improve their reading and writing (as cited in Olson et al., 2018, p. 82). The authors move on to share lessons on reading and writing informative/expository texts to support students in learning about the world around them. The Common Core State Standards and other state standards stress the significance of reading and writing informative/expository texts that teach about a topic with text-based details. These standards also “place a particular emphasis on students’ abilities to read and form interpretations about argumentative texts as well as write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics, using valid reasoning and evidence,” (p. 144). In addition, Olson et al. share lesson ideas for scaffolding reading and writing experiences in opinion, persuasive, interpretive, and argumentative texts, as these text genres can be challenging for students. Throughout the book, the authors emphasize the value of giving students real-world and authentic purposes to read and write.

Strengths and Uses

The book includes helpful examples of lessons, pictures, and graphics to guide teachers in developing lesson plans that build upon the ideas presented. The authors include a chart of cognitive strategies sentence starters on page 25 (Olson, et al, 2018). This list is really helpful for both teachers and students to connect their reading to writing and speaking. The chart gives students a place to begin when responding to texts and teachers a way to support their students. There are also various websites and online links throughout the book containing more examples of activities, videos, lessons, and diagrams to help teachers. All of the examples and lessons presented vary in grade level so educators can get ideas about how to adjust a lesson based on what grade level they teach. Most of the lesson ideas shared give specific advice on how to scaffold instruction, breaking up the learning so students gradually take over the work themselves. The authors use Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (1986) to support their assertions by stating, "with adult assistance children accomplish tasks that they ordinarily cannot perform independently" (p. 62).

This book has many strengths, including the extensive research cited to back up the literacy instruction ideas and suggestions. It gave me new ways to think about how to build a community of learners and to set up a classroom where students feel safe and are willing to take risks. The example lessons on teaching reading and writing in various genres showed how the proposed strategies can be taught at different grade or ability levels. The book is written clearly, is easy to read, and gave me new lessons to try. Administrators would benefit from reading this book in order to better understand the instruction going on within their elementary and middle school classrooms. Although some of the photographs are difficult to see, readers can go online to see colored versions of the photographs and other resources connected to the lessons. I would describe

this book as a useful resource for teachers in grades 2-8, including those with English learners and students at differing levels of ability in their class. It gives teachers a way to rethink the way they teach reading and writing.

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