Book Reviews

Language Arts Essentials


In search of technique. The Oxford English Dictionary (2003) defines the word “essential” as, “absolutely necessary; central to something’s nature.” Holding this definition in mind, Gail Tompkin’s book, Language Arts Essentials, is absolutely necessary when exposing teacher candidates to the central nature and nomenclature of language arts structures and practices. It is devoted to the technical aspects of teaching language arts, something which many teacher candidates feel takes a high priority as they survive the uncertainties of teaching for the first time.

Language Arts Essentials provides concise, critical information for teaching the language arts, supported and connected to current and applicable research. In each chapter, Tompkins provides readers with a thorough theoretical background overview from which a current language arts practice is distilled and implemented in current classrooms. The book is divided into the following sections:

- Teaching Language Arts Today
- Listening
- Talking
- Reading
- Writing
- Language Study

Each chapter contains examples of strategies grounded in the work of classroom practitioners and their students. A format of this nature proves extremely helpful to teacher candidates in implementing practices such as process writing, guided reading or language study. It is important to note that each chapter ends with a comprehensive review of key concepts, and skills presented. In short, Language Art Essentials would enhance the reading list of any language arts methods course. However, the text heavily reflects American teaching trends and content, the book offers no Canadian content. Canadian instructors will have to augment their reading lists with Canadian specific research and children’s literature to counter this limitation.

“Essential” missing pieces. As a language arts instructor, I have found all of Gail Tompkins’ books excellent additions to my undergraduate methods courses. Language Arts Essentials has been received well by teacher candidates that I have taught both in Canada and the US. It has proven to be an exemplary text which assists instructors to teach the foundational aspects of language arts to novices who are often anxiously preoccupied with the “how to” questions of teaching, and give little regard to the “why questions” of their teaching craft.
While I have been a heavy user of *Language Arts Essentials* I would like to bring to light some of the book’s limitations. Bar none it is an exemplary, ‘how to’ resource. With respect to the book’s structure and content it is clear that Dr. Tompkins’ intent was solely to address the technical needs of novices. But, what is misplaced in her intent is poignantly raised by Harste (2003, p.8) as he reflects upon the needs of students and literacy teachers in the new millennium: What social practices are in place and, as a result how is literacy being defined? Who benefits from this definition of literacy? Who is put into jeopardy? What kinds of things would I have to do to show that I honour the home literacies that my students bring with them to school? What will I have to do to expand on what it meant to be literature in the 21st century?

The behemoth of the standards-based curricula movement has rumbled across the landscape of education. Local boards of education have been pressured to keep abreast of new curriculum frameworks and accountability requirements. Administrators, teachers, educational researchers and parent groups sit in opposing camps fractured over the questions Harste (2003) raises. To this end, *Language Arts Essentials* does not provide users opportunity to enter and consider the role of critical perspectives that questions the existing literacy practices in relation to the marginalization and under achievement of certain populations in our school systems. A bountiful display of teaching strategies and classroom activities is benign when confronting the savage inequalities many children face and many teachers feel powerless in addressing through their daily work in schools.

**In search of transformative intellectuals as literacy teachers.** While *Language Arts Essentials* satiates the technical cravings of new teachers, it falls short in provoking new teachers in critiquing self and schooling as transformative intellectuals (Giroux & McLaren, 1986). The discourses and content of *Language Arts Essentials* needs to create space to guide beginning teachers to consider the following when designing their future programs as transformative intellectuals:

- Teachers need to take into account questions of language, culture, race, and the ways in which they affect a student’s academic and social outcomes. A student’s family, cultural and economic background should never be seen as impediments to learning or nor should they be pathologized as such.
- Educators need to critique curriculum and introduce material that allows students to see their lives outside of school reflected in school, along with their cultural and linguistic heritage.
- Teachers need to vigorously endeavor to understand the implications of all forms of oppression in their students’ lives. Student teachers should attempt to explore every aspect of the relationship between culture, politics, economics, and literacy development.
- Teachers need to see themselves as agents who are politically and morally protective of the histories, knowledge and experiences which define their students. And provide narratives and strategies of experienced classroom educators who have successfully taken up such issues.
Conclusion. The author of *Language Arts Essentials* has done an exemplary job of bringing to the life the fundamentals of language arts. With the exception of taking up issues of critical literacy, *Language Arts Essentials* will help to produce proficient technicians of language arts. However, the excellent technical focus of Tompkins’ book squeezes out the essentials of discourses associated with seeing literacy in the 21st as moral imperative for those experiencing success and marginalization in our schools. Language never developed on the landscape of humanity because of one user, but rather because of the need of two to communicate Halliday (1975) (as cited in Harste, 2003). Later editions of this book would benefit from presenting the issues and theoretical aspects of those silenced in the process of becoming literate in schools.

References

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Leading for Results: Transforming Teaching, Learning, and Relationships in Schools


Transformational leaders motivate others to do more than they had originally intended and thought possible; they set more challenging expectations and achieve higher performances (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Leading for Results: Transforming Teaching, Learning, and Relationships in Schools by Dr. Dennis Sparks serves as a useful guide for educators and educational leaders to promote and implement transformational leadership into their practice through a variety of strategies, methods, and applications. To encourage and challenge readers to transform their practice of teaching, learning, and relationship management within their institutions, this book focuses on the leader’s role in actualizing human potential and unleashing individual and organizational energy (Sparks, 2007). This is a much-needed, practical tool for those working in the field of education, particularly in consideration of the lack of material which presents tangible ways to explore and implement transformational leadership techniques specifically within educational settings.

The format of the book includes narratives and activities in a variety of areas pertaining to transforming educational leadership. The text is divided into four major sections: clarity and creation, interpersonal influence, organizational culture, and professional learning and doing. Within each of these sections, chapters are devoted to a variety of methods, tools, and insights which lead the reader towards an understanding of the overarching goals of each section. The chapters focus on personal values and assumptions in relation to individual leadership approaches, as well as, the organization as a whole. Within each chapter, the “Leading for Results” subsections are filled with thought-provoking lessons which challenge the reader to reflect and confront his or her assumptions from an array of perspectives. The chapters are short and direct; Sparks clarifies his points in an easily readable, concise manner.

The intent of this book is for a discovery of authenticity in education, a notion which is explored in each chapter as the reader is lead towards a different understanding of his or her personal viewpoints. For example, chapter 4 focuses on the identification of ways to achieve goals and presents assumptions about goal-setting to foster discussion. The exercises in chapter 34 focus on the reader’s views of the role of a leader in recognizing and alleviating anxiety. Other chapter topics include: changing habits, using genuine dialogue, and providing teachable points of view.

There are several areas where Sparks’ writing could have been more inclusive of terminology relevant to educators and educational leaders outside of K-12 settings. That said, it is clear that the intended audience for this book are those in leadership positions within educational settings, broadly speaking, including adult education programs, higher education, and corporate training environments. Also, readers should not assume that a “leader” is one with managerial responsibility. This book is inclusive of educators and others who are in leadership roles, but not necessarily principals or administrators within their
respective institutions. Readers should also not be misled by the frequent use of K-12 terminology (i.e., the words “principal”, “teacher”) which might indicate the content is more appropriate for K-12 leaders.

It is also worth noting that, since this book relies heavily on self-reflection, it may be perceived as not being effective for those who may not be inclined to write down thoughts, feelings, and opinions. The author takes a relaxed, open approach towards presenting and explaining the activities in the book while offering a set of useful tools. There is much to gain from the other elements included in this book; therefore readers should not be discouraged by the format.

The strengths of this book are its readability and applicability. The concise prose and consistent chapter structures throughout the book allow the reader to focus on the content and exercises, rather than being bogged down in irrelevant paragraphs. The content is relevant to various individuals, who hold a variety of roles and responsibilities, allowing for this book to be a useful, applicable tool for the field.

References

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