

A Balance Approach to Beginning Reading Instruction:
A Synthesis of Six Major U.S. Research Studies
by John Edwin Cowen

Reviewed by Joan E. Masaryk

The demand for educators to be aware of the research influencing their teaching is greater than ever. Especially since Reading First legislation limits what counts as research and dictates how reading should be taught and funded. Cowen asks the essential question (p.78). " How do we seek a balance approach to reading instruction if we do not seek a balanced approach to reading research?"

It is brilliant having six major U.S. Research studies on beginning reading instruction in one book. Each study gives us insight into what an effective reading program should look like. Some of the authors cited include: Bond, Dykstra, Chall, Adams, Hiebert, Snow, Anderson Shanahan and others. The studies give a wide scope of understanding reading instruction from 1967 to 2000. Cowen summarizes these six influential studies. The classroom teacher will find pertinent information for the classroom from the conclusions of these studies.

Here are a few of those insights:

p.9 On going assessment is needed to determine instructional and independent levels for students.

p.41 " Approaches in which systematic code instruction is included along with the reading of meaningful connected text, result in superior reading achievement for both low- readiness and better prepared students."

p. 41 Phonemic awareness is an important prerequisite to learning phonics and learning to read.

p.44 & 45 An onset & rime approach is recommended over traditional phonics because phonics generalizations are unreliable. Vowel sounds are stable in rimes. Phonics rules are correct only half of the time. 500 high frequency words can be derived from 37 rimes.

p.43 Reading aloud to children builds knowledge and skill necessary for beginning reading. Word recognition and vocabulary instruction developed through practice with authentic interesting literature is essential to a good reading program.

p.55 Students need to practice and use writing frequently.

p.55 & 59 Monitor for meaning by predicting, summarizing, inferring, cross-checking and self-correction.

p.67 Fluency is taught best through guided interaction and feed back from the teacher.
p.70 Comprehension strategies include self-monitoring, graphics, semantic organizers, story structure, scaffolding, questioning and summarization.

p.70 Staff development is essential for teachers to learn how to help students orchestrate and implement the multiple reading components in a successful way.

p.14 A model for staff development includes theory, demonstration, practice and coaching. The skills acquired by a staff are high when all four components are present. They are very low only 35% acquisition when only theory is present.

The studies mention in a limited way the issues classroom teachers have with language acquisition and multiple reading levels in one classroom. Although the studies clarify what an effective reading program should look like, they do not demonstrate how to put it all together.

I have only begun to touch upon some of the gems found in this book. A Balance Approach to Beginning Reading Instruction proves to be an informative, insightful and practical resource for teachers.