



Teaching Readers (Not Reading): Moving Beyond Skills and Strategies to Reader-Focused Instruction

1st ed. (2022)

Peter Afflerbach

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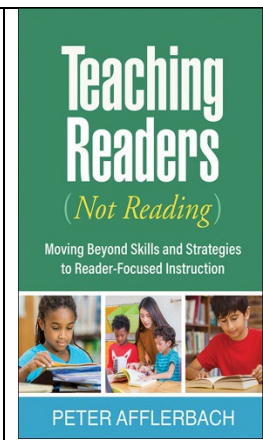
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Peter Afflerbach's new book: *Teaching Readers (Not Reading): Moving Beyond Skills and Strategies to Reader-Focused Instruction* is crucial to building a successful reader as a noun and not reading as a verb (Afflerbach, 2022). The book is about igniting reading from within. The book goes beyond the skills to the will and the thrill, as described by David Pearson on the book's back cover. In an essential sense, and as Robert Hernandez puts it, "It's not about having the skill to do something. It's about having the will, desire, and commitment to be your best". Afflerbach has intelligently brought back the "neglected essentials" of reading such as cognition, cognitive strategies, and skills while at the same time highlighting the importance of affective domain, conation, mindfulness, metacognition, self-efficacy, motivation, engagement, epistemic beliefs, and attributions, all of which are at the heart of reading. They are intangible factors that he promotes in the book. Numerous quotes, success stories, articles, and books argue that taught skills can soon be outdated with the fast pace of life, rapid technological advancements, and the sophistication of reading acts. However, one's attitude, being inspired, and passion for doing something is priceless. People are different; we are not one-size-fits-all, which explains why research indicates standardized testing assesses only what is being tested but not the proper understanding and students' abilities to apply knowledge in the vast disciplines of life.

The book is divided into two main parts: the first part talks about the difference between teaching reading and teaching readers, definitions of terms, the history of how reading has evolved to be taught in such a way, and the 'science of reading' misconception. Reading terms definitions is sometimes not as rewarding as it is experiencing something, so the author supplemented it with a practical reading exercise in which we were presented with a very challenging paragraph asking us to utilize our strategies to form meaning; the author then explained the cognitive strategies that professionals use to teach reading and his own proposed strategies to teaching readers. This exercise was refreshing because it transposes us to the struggling reader's position and the associated cognition, affect, and conation the struggling reader faces. Not surprisingly, cognitive strategies and skills development didn't work with the challenging paragraph we were asked to experience, but the reader-focused instruction that the author advocates was easier to apply.

Afflerbach calls for developing the internal factors of the reader that aid in reading, such

as motivation and engagement; we need to draw the reader into a book that promises a fascinating journey, a door that opens with adventure in which a reader can relate to or can even connect it with aspects of real life. As much as reading strategies, phonetics and skills are essential; it comes next to the 'other' factors of reading, such as motivation, self-efficacy, mindfulness, and attributions. The author draws an analogy of the struggling reader to text as it is to the author's personal experience of visiting the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV); the author has no prior knowledge of what the symbols/signs mean in the DMV, which is equal to the reader who has been assigned a text to read in which its purpose is narrow, predetermined and does not thrill the reader to read. Nothing in the text can excite the reader, just as the author keeps standing in queues only to be told that he needs to be in another queue.

The author has provided substantial evidence proving that cognitive strategies alone are not enough if not accompanied by other strategies. He cited Moore (1938), who identified several influences: nature and nurture, which flow and enhance development. Another piece of evidence is through the works of Strang (1961), who acknowledged the role of affective factor and conation. On the other hand, he presented examples of misconceptions in which reading is conceptualized through the lens of 'science' through the influence of the media and recent scholars who still support the role of cognition, such as in the works of Hanford (2018).

The second part of the book examines the influences of each factor in-depth. A chapter is dedicated to each Metacognition, Executive Functioning & Mindfulness (Chapter 7), Self-efficacy (Chapter 8), Motivation and Engagement (Chapter 9), Attributions & Growth Mindsets (Chapter 10), and Epistemology & Epistemic beliefs (Chapter 11), and how each interacts with the reader. The author provided several real-life scenarios to illustrate these factors pertinent to the reader; even with the well-known reading instruction techniques or the science of reading, as the author likes to call them, the 'other factors' are pivotal to reading achievement. Afflerbach presented well-sound theories such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Stanovich's Matthew Effects in reading to supplement the book's central thesis that science of reading alone is not enough to create a successful voracious reader. We were intrigued by the valuable template in the appendix Healthy Readers Profile, which aims to guide teachers in both reflecting on their teaching practice as well as capturing relevant information that measures readers' growth and development, such as classroom observation, listening to student conversation, interviewing the student, in addition to the standardized informal and formal assessments. Sadly, most of these have not been considered previously as the science of reading and phonics dominated the field.

The author urges educators, parents, classroom teachers, and interventionists to focus on the child and build a reader, not on reading and building a curriculum. He is steering us away from cognitive skills (yet in a balanced way) that rely extensively on phonetics, decoding, comprehension, and text critiquing to embracing other factors sustaining literacy. Metacognition, executive functioning, and mindfulness in chapter 7 teach readers to read purposefully and be mindful of the moment, set reasonable goals, aim to achieve them while detecting reading problems, and be conscious about the strategies they can use to form the meaning of the text. The dialogue excerpt between the teacher and the student serves as a perfect example that teachers can follow with their students; the series of questions [not merely stating strategies as most teachers might incline to do at the spur of the moment] the teacher asked enabled the student to become independent in taking ownership of his reading while figuring out a strategy that works for him during the reading process.

Self-efficacy in chapter 8 reminds us of all those who repeatedly failed yet made it to the end successfully, such as Walt Disney, Winston Churchill, Michael Jordan, and Thomas Edison, to

name just a few. The common thing among all those terms is their ‘Yes-I-Can-Do-Attitude.’ Our self-efficacy favorite quote would be “whether you think that you can or can’t, you’re usually right” by Henry Ford. The idea of self-efficacy is valid and makes a lot of sense, as theorized by Bandura, as the belief in one self’s capabilities. This self-efficacy doesn’t happen spontaneously; it needs encouraging parents, teachers, and peers, resources that can aid students with their endeavors, setting reasonable challenging tasks that promote self-efficacy, a classroom infused with positive feelings, and, most importantly, an environment conducive to acknowledging and celebrating achievements. Put, it takes team works to create a successful, competent reader.

Chapters 9 through 11 are pivotal to developing a reader; a reader needs to be within the reciprocal sphere of motivation and engagement; one influences the other; whichever comes first is no less important than the other as they are in one loop or a cyclical grandiose of reading exaltation. It’s incredible how psychology and education seep into each other’s domain, making them complete. This is clear in chapter 10 on how the reader attributes their reading or school progress and the associated feelings/emotions during the task. This continuous self-checking is crucial for one’s mental well-being and growth mindsets. Last but not least, the author calls for text reflection, epistemology, and epistemic beliefs; we each come from different worlds, and asking students to make sense of the text or what informed their understanding paves the way for lots of enriching discussions, debates, and interesting scholarly talk in the class.

Reading is a journey that starts with a book; Afflerbach has brought in all the different branches that might be unheralded to show us how to build a competent reader. He has crafted well-organized book chapters supplemented with dialogue excerpts or short stories that tell us what we need to know in an easy-to-digest and can be implemented without difficulty. The guiding questions and the templates provided throughout the book were abundant, giving the book a practical aspect or hands-on approach to educators, not merely a book to read. Teaching Readers (not reading) doesn’t apply to students alone; he has taught us adults and readers of his book to move beyond instruction to other intangible psychological factors of a child that largely influence reading achievement. This book is also reminiscent of an almost more than a century-call by Edmond Huey “to completely analyze what we do when we read would almost be the acme of psychologist’s achievement, for it would be to describe very many of the most intricate workings of the human mind” (Huey, 1908) (p. 6). As we look at the facets and megatrends of reading acts, we will always side with Peter Afflerbach and Edmond Huey more than a century ago.

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