

Book Review

Teaching Kids to Read: Basic skills for Australian and NZ parents and teachers

Author: Fay Tran

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Reviewed by Peter Westwood

There are three main reasons why I strongly recommend this book to teachers and parents. First, the author unashamedly advocates a systematic and explicit approach to the teaching of phonic knowledge and decoding skills. Second, the content of the book actually covers very much more than the teaching of phonics – for example, the author briefly explores difficulties in learning basic mathematics, writing, the use of computers, specific problems associated with ADHD, and many other topics. She also describes clearly many of the cognitive, emotional and motivational factors that can cause certain students to experience learning difficulties. Third, the author has used an anecdotal case-study and lesson plan approach, a style that readily brings her practical advice alive for teachers and parents.

The teaching methods for literacy advocated in this book are applications and adaptations of the long-established Spalding Method* (sometimes referred to as the Orton-Spalding Method). An essential element of this approach is the explicit teaching of a set of *phonograms*. This author defines a phonogram as, 'The written equivalent of a sound unit using either a single letter or small group of letters to represent each pronounceable part of a word' (p.ix). Examples of phonograms include units such as: 's', 'oy', 'dge', 'tch'. On pages 165-172 the author presents a list of all phonograms, with examples of words in which they occur. Children need to know these units thoroughly in order to decode and encode words swiftly and confidently as they read and write. The author clearly describes the many ways that children can practise and learn these important units; and she illustrates these points in her sample lesson plans tied to each particular student's needs.

Parents, beginning teachers, and those in training, will find the lesson notes and the resource materials (word lists, word families, phonograms) particularly helpful. The lists make up the final third of the book, and they cover specific information that is rarely if ever provided now for primary school teachers within their pre-service teacher education courses.

The format and style of *Teaching Kids to Read* will appeal to teachers and

parents; it is bright, welcoming, and easily read with understanding. The only very minor criticism I will make is that I think the book would have been even more user friendly if a detailed index had been provided at the end. The list of contents at the front of the book is comprehensive, but it is not very helpful for locating specific information quickly, because page numbers are not indicated.

Teaching Kids to Read is likely to appeal strongly to all LDA members. The practical suggestions contained within it represent a practitioner's lifetime of experience in helping students with learning difficulties and of putting learners on the right road to literacy. Moreover, the methods advocated are entirely compatible with what we now consider to be effective, evidence-based instruction, and with the National Curriculum.

[Note: *The Spalding Method is fully explained in Romalda Spalding's text *The Writing Road to Reading*, first published in 1957 and now in its fifth edition. Readers can also find many descriptions of the Spalding Method on the Web.]

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