Regie Routman set out to write a political book when she wrote *Literacy at the Crossroads*. Public schools have been attacked by political critics riding the “back to basics” bandwagon. This well-written, and even heartening, book portrays the many sides of language arts teachers’ professional lives. Her portrayal describes the political challenges facing them and proposes effective strategies for meeting, overcoming, and more importantly, winning over these critics, or at least the parents of the school children.

The book consists of three parts. The first part, “Dealing with the Politics of Education,” examines school bashing and whole language criticism. This examination relates three cases of failed and successful school innovations. Then it explores the realities and misinterpretations of whole language. The section concludes with proposals for different approaches to becoming political.
teachers arming themselves with the facts and listening to, communicating with, and involving parents. Part 2, “Back to Basics and Other Teaching Dilemmas,” portrays some central educational controversies confronting language arts teachers. These controversies revolve around the supposed solutions to the “failure” of whole language: back to basics, phonics, and teaching spelling and grammar.

“Empowerment for Life,” the final part, proposes different ways for teachers and students and their education. She concludes this section by challenging teachers to lead the type of literacy life they want their students to lead.

_Literacy at the Crossroads_ is not one-sided or narrowly ideological. It does not engage in lambasting the critics, thus avoiding further polarization. Instead it is a considered and principled response to the politicizing of literacy instruction exemplified in the criticism of the whole language approach. Since the publisher, Heineman, is a leading publisher of whole less well-balanced book. What we get is a book which answers the critics of whole language classroom-based examples, Routman shows how the whole language approach does the deal more, in providing the type of education parents and citizens want for their children.

approach than the one practiced in these days of heated polemics. She provides measured educational debate is politicized, suggestions which ESL professionals might find useful if debates on bilingual education, Ebonics, or the English Only movement. The basic approach critics, revealing what is actually happening in classrooms, explaining how what is happening to worried individuals, and speaking knowledgeably about educational issues. She argues that these are where teachers are learners, and where students can attain competence and self-respect, “speaking out, knowing the research, writing proposals, experimenting in [their] own class with local and national audiences” (p. 165). This approach demands that teachers become into becoming. Teachers need to be responsible representatives of their profession, not speaking only the language of the profession, but also communicating in the language of the parents and students.

Routman directs some criticism at teachers who claim to be whole language, but who fail does not exclude phonics or the teaching of spelling. Phonics is a part of learning to read, a acquiring literacy; thus phonics should be part of whole language teachers’ repertoires. To some education departments fail to train their teachers in phonics. Furthermore, she points out the truly learning disabled, need the intensive phonics training espoused by the phonics supporters teaching spelling while also honoring the early invented spellings, which she points out reveal toward becoming a literate user of the language. To support this progression, she supplies eight guidelines for encouraging students to become good spellers. These eight guidelines encourage attention to spelling in authentic ways. Routman further argues for explicit modeling and showing students how to do something when the time is right.

Since this is not an ESL book per se, nor does it delve into research or questions concerning might decide not to read the book. This decision would deprive them of the opportunity to not that different from those faced by ESL professionals. We need only to consider the debates emphases. Furthermore, many issues that Routman raises about assessment, modeling literature out of current ESL discussions. Not only [-2-] does she offer suggestions for the classroom verbs that come from the students, she also offers sound suggestions for developing and:
materials and ideas and through joining support groups. Just as importantly, she examines issues of teacher development, from the initial support a new teacher needs to the ongoing support teachers need to re-envision their classrooms and deal with change.

The final section of *Literacy at the Crossroads* shares with the readers the importance of teacher research. Routman shows how teacher research has informed her teaching. More importantly, she shows how doing such research can empower the classroom by enabling teachers to practice and model the inquiry and reflection that they are asking of their students.

A final reason for picking up this non-ESL book is that, like other books written by committed teachers (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Paley, 1981, 1986, 1992) or about such teachers (Kidder, 1989), the book reminds us of why people became teachers and what they are doing right. There is no library of books like this for ESL teachers, books that richly portray the lives of teachers and show how they deal with the various problems they face. Without such a library we need to rely on books such as Routman’s not only for ideas, but for encouragement. Perhaps, as ESL as a field commits itself to teacher research and its many possibilities, books will emerge that serve a similar function. Until that time, we need voices reminding us of what we can do and providing visions of possibilities.

**References**


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