

A Summary of Balanced Literacy

Balanced Literacy from a Reading Lens

“What is “balanced literacy instruction” from my perspective? It involves explicit, systematic and completely thorough teaching of the skills required to read and write in a classroom environment where there is much reading of authentic literature--including information books and much composing by students. Balanced literacy instruction is demanding in every way that literacy instruction can be demanding. Students are expected to learn the skills and learn them well enough to be able to transfer them to the reading and writing of texts. Yes, this is done in a strongly supportive environment, with the teacher providing a great deal of direct teaching, explanations and re-explanations, and hinting to students about the appropriateness of applying skills they have learned previously to new texts and tasks. As children learn the skills and use them, the demands in balanced classrooms increase, with the goal of the balanced literacy teacher being to move students ahead, so that every day there is new learning; every day students are working at the edge of their competencies and growing as readers and writers” (Pressley, 2003).

Balanced Literacy is a framework for instructional planning and implementation, not a program for teaching reading. It involves the use of observation and assessment to make instructional decisions; the structure of classroom delivery that moves through whole group, small group, and independent learning to build student competence and independence; and incorporates a balance of quality fiction and nonfiction materials to support instruction and learning.

Use of Observation and Assessment

A teacher in a balanced literacy classroom uses observation and assessment to monitor the reading acquisition and development of children as they grow as readers. This requires a deep and working knowledge of multiple ways to assess the foundational areas of reading and having the flexibility to use assessment and observation data to make instructional decisions and modify instruction to meet the needs of each learner. It requires conversations between and among teachers at grade levels and across grade levels to discuss and problem-solve the reading needs of students.

Balanced literacy incorporates the five foundation elements of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development and comprehension, into an instructional framework that is based on the Gradual Release of Responsibility Theory of Vygotsky. The teacher’s goal is to support the reading growth and development of students so that they are independent learners. The teacher uses a structure of whole group, small group, and individual learning settings to identify and support the Zone of Proximal Development, the specific area of challenge where rigorous instruction can support and expand the learning of each student.

Beginning with students in preschool and kindergarten, this involves a combination of language development, phonemic awareness, and phonics-building instructional experiences that include a combination of explicit instruction and learning in the context of reading and writing experiences. As learners move through the developmental stages of reading, more and more emphasis is placed on developing the ability to read fluently and to make meaning and maximize comprehension of all types of texts and material.

Assessment/Intervention

A key component of a balanced literacy classroom is the use of systematic assessment to inform instruction. This system of assessments includes; assessments for screening, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring assessments and summative assessments. It is imperative that teachers know the current strengths and needs of each student in all areas of reading, specifically: phonemic awareness; phonics and word analysis; fluency; vocabulary development; and comprehension development.

Screening Assessments: The screening assessments give overall information of the knowledge and skills that all students have relating to reading. It is very important in the early stages of reading development that teachers use assessments that give clear descriptions of the phonemic awareness and phonics development of the students, as well as oral reading comprehension and fluency. Teachers also collect writing samples and use evaluation rubrics to identify possible needs according to the developmental stages of writing.

Diagnostic Assessments: If the screening assessments indicate potential areas of difficulty or need, the teacher can employ a diagnostic assessment to identify the degree of need in a particular area. Using the data from the assessment, the teacher identifies the interventions needed to help the student or students develop those reading areas. Assessment also assists in the flexible grouping of students. Teachers need to have diagnostic assessments that evaluate phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension development and vocabulary knowledge. Examples can be found at: <http://reading.uoregon.edu> and <http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/scoring.php>

Progress Monitoring: On a regular basis, the teacher uses a combination of observation and informal assessment to monitor the literacy progress of the students. Developmental checklists, running records, phonics inventories and writing samples are some examples.

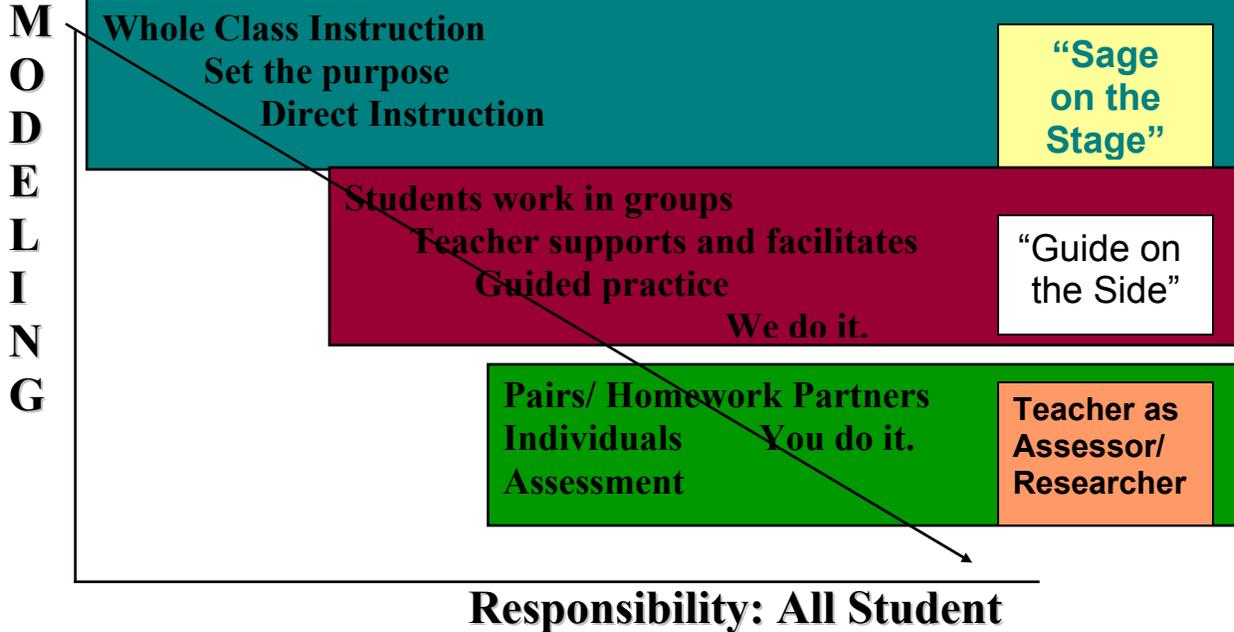
Summative Assessments: At specific times (generally at the beginning, middle and end of the school year), it is important to administer summative assessments to make sure that students have achieved important learning benchmarks. The information from these assessments will inform the teacher of instructional areas that might need revision and also areas in which some students need re-teaching.

Intervention: Based on regular assessments and observation, teachers can develop purposeful, targeted intervention to meet the specific needs of each individual child. The teacher can use assessment data to form flexible groups for intensive intervention.

The Gradual Release of Responsibility

In a balanced literacy classroom, the teacher uses the Vygotsky Gradual Release of Responsibility Model of Instruction that begins with a clear learning objective or goal. The teacher explicitly teaches the objective and any concept, idea or strategy that meets the objective. The teacher then models this, specifically showing the students how to do it. At that time, the teacher has designed learning experiences where the students can work in small groups or on their own to practice. This practice time is guided by the teacher. The teacher observes and supports to ensure that the students are growing in their ability to meet the learning objective of the day. The teacher also includes opportunities for the student to individually demonstrate the degree to which they have learned the objective.

Responsibility: All Teacher



The Structure of Classroom Delivery: Time/Scheduling

In a balanced literacy classroom there must be, at minimum, **90 minutes** of reading time, (although Barbara Taylor, Reading First researcher, recommends **120 minutes** of reading in grades K-3). These 90-120 minutes are part of the language arts block.

Example of how this time *might* be scheduled:

Whole Group Lesson

(15- 20 Minutes)

Introduction: The teacher introduces and explicitly instructs the main learning of the day. This may include reading aloud.

Modeling: The teacher shows the students how, by actually modeling the learning of the lesson.

Setting the Purpose: The teacher clearly explains what students will learn and be able to demonstrate after the guided practice and independent work relating to this lesson.

Small Group and Independent Learning

(60-80 minutes)

(During this time, the teacher may be meeting in small groups or observing and assessing students.)

Small Group

Shared Reading:

- Teacher reads to students from Big Books. Students join in with teacher at appropriate places.
- Allows students to participate in reading texts they are not yet able to read independently.
- Reading level crosses instructional reading levels.
- The teacher or a more competent reader leads and others join in.

- Grouping. Small groups are common, but this can occur with whole class. The number of copies of the text that are available or visible to students may determine grouping.

Guided Reading:

- The teacher provides support for **small, flexible groups** of readers.
- Readers are **grouped** according to their reading level and their specific needs relating to **skills and strategies**.
- During guided reading, teachers work with students at their **instructional level** to guide them in using the context, visual and structure cues within stories to generate meaning.
- The teacher helps students learn to use **reading strategies**, such as context clues, letter and sound knowledge, phonics strategies, syntax or word structure, as they read a text or book that is unfamiliar to them.
- The **goal** of guided reading is for students to **use these strategies independently** on their way to becoming fluent, skilled readers.
- **Children have the opportunity to:** develop as individual readers, develop reading strategies, enjoy success while reading for meaning, and learn how to select and enjoy books on their own.

Paired Reading:

- Students work with a partner to read and discuss text.
- Students apply and practice the skills and strategies learned in whole group and guided reading lessons.

Intervention Groups:

- The teacher identifies groups of 2-4 students with a specific reading need and develops **intensive interventions** that target that need. The group meets several times. If a student's needs are remediated, they move to independent learning. If the need is improving, the intervention continues. If the intervention is not assisting in helping the student make progress, another intervention is developed. **Specialists may assist in this area.*

Independent Learning

Independent Reading:

- Children read books that are **easy** for them to read.
- The teacher guides students to increase the challenge of their selections.
- These may be books they have already read in guided reading, books read during shared reading, or books that are new to them that they can read easily on their own.
- Students learn to independently select books and respond in book logs and response journals.

Literacy Centers:

- A literacy center is designed as a place where students complete **independent activities during the guided reading period**.
- Specific tasks lead children to **explore and practice** the concepts taught in classroom lessons and experienced in guided reading lessons, shared reading experiences or writing experiences.
- The centers **will require mini-lessons** where the teacher demonstrates the process.

Ongoing Assessment:

- The teacher schedules time to observe, conference, assess and monitor progress of students while they work.

Return to Whole Group Learning

(10-20 minutes)

The teacher revisits the purpose and talks about the learning of the day. Students share and turn in their work to show their progress.

Readers share celebrations, reflections and new understanding—usually related to the teaching done during the mini-lesson.

Rituals, Routines and Responsibilities

In order for this model to work and work well, the teacher must do several things including:

Classroom Management

The teacher must create an environment that is productive and organized. Students must have a clear understanding of what they are supposed to be doing at all times and be aware of opportunities to practice new routines.

The Belief that All Students Can Learn to Read

Believe that all students can learn and become independent learners.

Work with students to design classroom routines and rituals.

Explain the responsibilities of all classroom members.

Design rubrics and checklists that can assist students in their work.

Clear, Aligned Instructional Goals and Assessments

If a teacher has a clear curriculum or scope and sequence for reading, she can begin to ensure that the learning goals are aligned to the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards. In thinking of each learning area, the teacher must determine if that learning is new and will be introduced, if students were exposed to the learning before, if the learning is ongoing, or if it must be mastered during that school year. At this time, the teacher can determine initial assessments to determine the depth of student knowledge on these learning areas, progress monitoring assessments to ensure that the instruction is working, and summative assessments to determine if students can demonstrate the learning.

A Variety of Instructional Tools, Resources and Strategies

Balanced literacy is a philosophy of teaching. Basals are the tool used to deliver the learning objectives. The assessments guide the instruction, identify learning needs, and determine if the instruction works. It is important to have resources, such as intervention tools and resources, a classroom library with a balance of fiction and nonfiction, and hands-on manipulatives to assist in teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, and word analysis. If one understands the philosophy of balanced literacy instruction, one can use a basal series or leveled books and other resources for instruction.

Balance of Quality Fiction and Nonfiction Materials

Instructional Materials, Programs and Practices

In a balanced literacy classroom, instruction is based on developing each reader, moving and supporting a minimum of a full year of reading growth in each school year, and using curriculum goals and assessment data to inform and drive instruction.

The reading program supported by the concepts of balanced literacy has written and clear outcomes or goals for every grade level that is aligned to state and/or national literacy standards. This curriculum guides overall instruction as it provides overarching learning goals for the class. Within this structure, the teacher uses assessment to monitor the progress of the students in meeting these goals and providing the necessary intervention to assist students.

Instructional materials and intervention practices and programs are chosen based on the degree to which they support the curricular learning goals and the degree to which assessment indicates that it is working for all children. Basals and literature selected to support student learning are also aligned to the curriculum and monitored by assessment to ensure that they are the best resources to support the development of students.

Supporting Research

Defining the Balanced Literacy Approach

“In a truly balanced literacy program, **how** you teach is as important as **what** you teach... We wonder: How can we maintain the good practices of the past without ignoring current evidence about how children learn? Have we gone too far in one direction? What we're searching for, then, is balance, and in that search, concerns common to all teachers have surfaced. In this article, I focus on some of them — and how we have found middle ground” (Strickland, 2007).

“What is “balanced literacy instruction” from my perspective? It involves explicit, systematic, and completely thorough teaching of the skills required to read and write in a classroom environment where there is much reading of authentic literature--including information books and much composing by students. Balanced literacy instruction is demanding in every way that literacy instruction can be demanding. Students are expected to learn the skills and learn them well enough to be able to transfer them to the reading and writing of texts. Yes, this is done in a strongly supportive environment, with the teacher providing a great deal of direct teaching, explanations and re-explanations, and hinting to students about the appropriateness of applying skills they have learned previously to new texts and tasks. As children learn the skills and use them, the demands in balanced classrooms increase, with the goal of the balanced literacy teacher being to move students ahead, so that every day there is new learning; every day students are working at the edge of their competencies and growing as readers and writers” (Pressley, 2003).

Balanced Literacy is a philosophy for reading instruction that includes the best elements of both systematic or explicit phonics instruction, with whole language philosophy. The balanced literacy teacher will combine the strengths of whole-language philosophy with appropriate explicit skills instruction. In so doing create an instructional approach that is more than the sum of its parts. Balanced instruction is based on the synergetic relationship which exists between the whole-

language philosophy and more systematic phonics approaches to reading instruction (Pressley, 2002).

“It is important to underscore the place of phonics in a beginning literacy program. Systematic phonics instruction by itself does not help students acquire all the processes they need to become successful readers and writers. It needs to be combined with other essential instructional components to create a complete and balanced program” (Willows, 2002).

“Balanced literacy — an approach to reading instruction that strikes a compromise between phonics approaches and whole language approaches -- ideally, the most effective strategies are drawn from the two approaches and synthesized together” (SEDL, 2008).

“Balanced does not mean that all skills and standards receive equal emphasis at a given point in time. Rather, it implies that the overall emphasis accorded a skill or standard is determined by its priority or importance relative to students’ language and literacy levels and needs...the heart of a powerful reading program is the relationship between explicit systematic skills instruction, literature, language and comprehension. While skills alone are insufficient to develop good readers, no reader can become proficient without these foundational skills” (CDE, 1999).

Balanced reading instruction means a combination of approaches. Where phonics advocates assert that children need training in both phonemic awareness, by which they develop an awareness of individual sounds, and in cueing strategies, through which they learn to decode the text and comprehend the material (Kelly, 1997).

What is needed is a balanced approach to reading instruction - an approach that combines the language and literature-rich activities associated with whole language activities aimed at enhancing meaning, understanding, and the love of language with explicit teaching skills as needed to develop fluency associated with proficient readers. (Honig, 1996).

Support for the Balanced Literacy Philosophy

“With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act, balanced literacy is the U.S. Department of Education's prescription for bringing together the best of reading research from both philosophies. Balanced literacy employs the fundamentals of letter-sound correspondence, word study and decoding as well as holistic experiences in reading, writing, speaking and listening to create one integrated model that addresses all the facets of literacy” (McKenzie, 2002).

"There is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read. Therefore, teachers must have a strong knowledge of multiple methods for teaching reading and a strong knowledge of the children in their care so they can create the appropriate balance of methods needed for the children they teach." There is a strong research base supporting this position. Large-scale studies of reading methods have shown that no one method is better than any other method in all settings and situations (Adams, 1990; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Foorman et al., 1998; Hoffman, 1994; Stallings, 1975).

In her book, *American Reading Instruction*, Nila Banton Smith advocates for the balanced approach for four reasons; 1) research supports the need to teach readers to construct meaning, 2) a balanced approach is more respectful to the range of reading research, 3) a balanced approach supports the wisdom of practice, and 4) retains practices that have proven useful and effective. She cites Chall’s developmental stage theory and the work of the National Reading Panel (NRP)

which indicate that no single approach has been identified, that drill and practice approaches do not fully support linguistic understanding, and embedded approaches, using reading and writing in context to teach skills areas has been strongly implicated in the research. The balanced approach includes the research from many areas, and also, the pedagogical practices supported by reading research. The balanced approach “may represent our only alternative to the pendulum swing view of reading for most of the 20th Century. A transformational rather than a cyclical view of the process” (p. 470-472).

Using science to clarify ambiguities in understanding philosophies that “balance” whole language and phonics philosophies.

“Teachers are now being encouraged to look beyond the restrictions of the traditional approaches to reading instruction, and to **use research evidence to gain an understanding of the reading process that allows them to make clearer and more purposeful instructional decisions.** More importantly, teachers are able to **use the information provided by research to customize instructional strategies to individual children's needs** -- rather than creating lessons based on a philosophy or an approach, teachers can examine a child's development in reading and respond with appropriate instruction... Rather than picking the best elements from these two approaches, it seems sensible to simply ask what information about reading and reading instruction has been supported by research, and move forward from there. If we focus on what research has said about how children learn to read, and if we truly focus on the educational needs of each individual child that is learning to read, then we do not need to concern ourselves with striking any sort of balance or making any compromises in our reading instruction. Educators should not be asking whether a lesson is phonics-based or whole language-based, they should be asking whether a lesson is going to help a specific beginning reader to learn to read” (Wren, 2008).

Possible Over-Teaching of Phonics

Many poorer readers are ones for whom phonics was over taught, with little or no emphasis on trying to make meaning while reading (e.g. Chomsky, 1976; Carbo, 1987; Meek, 1983).

Too much emphasis on phonics encourages children to use "sound it out" as their first and possibly only independent strategy for dealing with problem words (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1988).

Michael Pressley (2002) describes the most sensible beginning-reading curriculum as one with a balance of skills development and authentic reading and writing. He goes on to state that this is really what good teachers do. Pressley makes clear the need for balance in the following statements. "No matter how good the phonics instruction is... it is not enough to produce excellent literacy in students. The whole-language components stimulate elements of literacy development not affected by decoding (phonics) instruction alone, such as vocabulary development, writing competence, and positive attitudes toward reading and writing (Pressley, 2002, p.223).

Supporting the Foundational Training and Ongoing Professional Development of Educators

“According to data collected for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading, the prevalent instructional philosophy shifted in 1996 from whole language to balanced literacy, but NAEP scores have been unaffected by this shift. When the prevalent philosophy shifted in the late '80s and early '90s from phonics to whole language, NAEP scores did not change then either. **It would seem the philosophies that drive the curricula simply do not in**

themselves have an impact on student performance. What does have an impact on student performance is the quality, strength, knowledge, and sophistication of the teacher. That is what really matters for helping children to become proficient readers” (Wren, 2008).

The Need to Assess and Observe Children and Select the Specific Instruction and Intervention Needed

“Children who have already developed phonics skills can apply them to reading and do not require the same level and intensity in phonics instruction provided to children at the initial phases of reading acquisition” (NICHDD, 2000 p.11).

“When phonics instruction is linked to children’s genuine efforts to read and write, they are motivated to learn. **When phonics instruction is linked to children’s reading and writing, they are more likely to become strategic and independent in their use of phonics than when phonics instruction is drilled and practiced in isolation. *Phonics knowledge is critical but not sufficient to support growing independence in reading***” (IRA, 1997. p. 4).

Incorporating Phonics Instruction in Content of Reading and Writing

Research demonstrates that in classrooms where **phonics is taught in the context** of rereading favorite stories, songs, and poems, children develop and use phonics knowledge better than in classrooms where skills are taught in isolation. Similarly, phonics knowledge is developed by encouraging and helping emergent writers to spell by writing appropriate letters for the sounds they hear in words. (Weaver, 1994b)

The best predictor in kindergarten or grade 1 of a future difficulty in grade 3 is performance on a combination of measures of phonemic awareness: rapid naming of letters, numbers and objects, and print awareness. Instruction using the following types of phonemic awareness tasks has had a positive effect on reading acquisition and spelling for pre-readers: rhyming, auditorily discriminating sounds that are different, blending spoken sounds into words, word-to-word matching, isolating sounds in words, counting phonemes, segmenting spoken words into sounds, deleting sounds from words. (Ball & Blachman, 1991; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1990; Cunningham, 1990; Foorman, Francis, Beeler, Winikates & Fletcher, in press; Lie, 1991; Lundberg, Frost & Petersen, 1988; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1987b; Yopp, 1988)

We do not need to teach children phonics rules if we give them plenty of guided opportunities to learn letter/sound patterns (Holdaway, 1979; Cambourne, 1988; Stephens, 1991; Weaver, 1994b; Smith & Elley, 1995). It appears that for most children (about 75-80 %), phonics and phonemic awareness are learned and used when taught in the course of learning to read and write. Other children can be given additional tutorial help as needed.

Most young readers are not good at learning analytically, abstractly or auditorily (Carbo, 1987). Therefore, for most young children, it is harder to learn phonics through part-to-whole teaching (phonics first) than through whole-to-part teaching (reading and writing first, and learning phonics from and along with words in familiar texts.)

There needs to be a combination of whole language and phonics in order for the students to truly succeed. Educators should strive for what is best for the students. (Taylor, 1997)

Increasingly, researchers are finding better results from teachers who take a balanced approach, especially with children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Scholars have begun to call for consensus on the balanced approach. It is time for the debate to cool down and for advocates on both sides to recognize the wisdom of teaching "what works." (Matson, 1996)

Phonics instruction is an integral component of a language arts program and offers children important skills and strategies for the developing reading and writing abilities. Use phonics to enrich existing language arts curricula by combining phonics instruction with real-life connections, such as children's names, recipes, mail, signs, read-along songs, shopping, rhyming poems and games. (Spann, 1996)

Research Implications

Research calls for explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics along with early and continued exposure to rich literature and writing opportunities.

The comprehension instruction and the decoding instruction should be separate from each other while children are learning to decode, but both types of instructional activities should occur. In other words, comprehension and decoding instruction should be balanced.

Beginning reading programs are made up of many components that are interrelated. Teachers work with several components at one time, and children are helped to see the importance of these relationships.

Effective reading instruction helps children learn to use phonics along with their prior knowledge and context, rather than in isolation.

A proper balance between phonics and meaning in instruction; attention to basic skills within context of rich literature. There is validity to methods derived from many different philosophical bases.

Phonics should not be taught as a separate "subject" with emphasis on drills and rote memorization. The key is a balanced approach and attention to each child's individual needs. Many children's understanding of phonics will arise from their interest, knowledge and ideas. Others will benefit from more formal instruction. There are many opportunities to teach the sound a letter makes when children have reason to know. For example, the first letter a child learns typically is the first letter of her name.

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Walter McKenzie is an educational consultant and the author of [Multiple Intelligences and Instructional Technology: A Manual for Every Mind](#) (ISTE, 2002). He is currently an Instructional Technology Coordinator for the Arlington, Virginia Public Schools. You can reach him at walter@surfaquarium.com.

Dorothy S. Strickland is a renowned reading expert and professor of education at Rutgers University. She has also served as president of the International Reading Association.

Developed by B. Houck, 2008