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Balanced Literacy in an Elementary Classroom

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What is the impact of a balanced literacy framework in an elementary classroom? During the 2014-15 school year, a Learning Literacy Team (LLT) was established that included 10 teachers in grades K-5 who were the teachers for the pilot classes for the balanced literacy framework implementation. In response to LLT findings, high stakes tests and school-wide testing results, our district adopted the Balanced Literacy Framework. The administration, Curriculum Director, and our Literacy Coach decided to implement the program for all classes in grades K-5 at the beginning of the 2015-16 school year.

The balanced literacy framework is a dramatic shift in how our students will learn the English and Language Arts (ELA) standards compared to how our core reading program previously taught literacy and the ELA standards. Prior to balanced literacy, our school district had used a basal reader for 14 years for literacy instruction. The balanced literacy framework has several components that students engage in to learn the ELA standards. The framework focuses on reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

My interest in this topic is to understand the history of balanced literacy, what components are used, what issues have arisen in districts where a balanced literacy framework was adopted, and what impact it has had on student literacy performance.

Chapter 2 provides information on the history of balanced literacy, what components are included in a framework implementation, and research on balanced literacy. Chapter 3 provides recommendations for an effective balanced literacy framework implementation and needed on-going support.

Definitions

Balanced literacy: an approach designed to help individual students learn how to process a variety of increasingly challenging texts with understanding and fluency (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001)

Basal reader: a student textbook that is a collection of reading selections (Dewitz & Jones, 2013)

Phonics: a method where pupils learn letter sounds and groups of letters (Singer & Ruddell, 1985)

Whole language: an approach that promotes acceptance of all learners through supportive classrooms, flexibility within the structure, expectations for success as skills are taught in context, and teacher support for learning is provided through scaffolding and collaboration (Weaver, Gillmeister-Krause, & Vento-Zogby, 1996)

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Balanced Literacy

The term *balanced literacy* itself and what it means is still open to interpretation. Some look at balanced literacy as a combination of whole language and skills-based instruction. Shaw and Hurst (2012) maintained that balanced literacy is an approach that provides different levels of teacher support, student control, and an understanding that reading and writing develop naturally. Although the term itself may be an ambiguous concept without a definitive agreement among literacy researchers, they all agree it is an approach that has a balance of literacy elements.

Balanced literacy first originated in California in 1996 (California Department of Education, 1996). Balanced literacy, in its infancy, had a focus on skills-based teaching and explicit instruction during independent blocks of reading. Combining both reading and writing are necessary components of a balanced literacy program. In the beginning, balanced literacy focused on presenting skill-based teaching and meaning-based instruction taught during separate literacy blocks. The focus of this new framework was the systematic and explicit teaching of phonics as a basis for comprehension, as well as presenting literature-based opportunities (Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005).

Balanced literacy instruction is a multi-faceted process. It involves teachers planning assessment-based instruction that incorporates research-based practices. It is not a one-size-fits all model of literacy instruction. Studies have been conducted that have shown that the effective teacher blends perspectives to strategically balance a variety of methods and content rather than following one perspective over another (e.g., Zygouris-Coe, 2001). Balanced literacy instruction teaches students skills in reading and writing that are based upon their

individual needs and within the context of appropriate leveled reading materials that are of interest to the student. Many teachers feel the balanced literacy approach to reading allows them to do a better job of empowering teachers and students. This is accomplished in part by reading in real books, explicit instruction in skills and strategies, teaching writing skills through the writing process, and speaking and listening practices (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000).

It is important to keep in mind that just as our world is an ever changing place, so too are the demands for literacy which are never static or absolute. Teachers must be knowledgeable about language and literacy issues, be adept at seeking out information, and be able to relate these understandings to daily working knowledge about the students they are working with (Heydon, Hibbert, & Iannacci, 2004).

Direct explicit instruction (Zygouris-Coe, 2001) is a critical component of a balanced literacy program and needs to be evident in the following areas:

- Phonemic and phonological awareness and letter-sound knowledge in both kindergarten and first grade;
- Blending and segmenting in first grade and sound symbol correspondence structural analysis, contextual clues, and high frequency words;
- Spelling;
- Comprehension strategies in order to evaluate, synthesize, analyze, connect, infer and inquire; and
- Vocabulary instruction.

Also, students read both orally and silently and are read to from a variety of increasingly complex fiction and non-fiction texts at both independent and instructional levels across the curriculum, including texts in the students' first language. Students who are

beginning readers would practice fluency in predictable and decodable texts with phonetically regular patterns. Students read both teacher assigned and self-selected literature and texts. In the balanced literacy program, students write daily to support and extend their knowledge of the structure of language and to construct meaning. Ongoing formative assessments that are both formal and informal allow the teachers to intervene early with appropriate instruction to students who are not progressing and help teachers determine the students' abilities and needs, as well as the effectiveness of the program itself (Zygouris-Coe, 2001).

Additional elements (Zygouris-Coe, 2001) that need to be included in the correct amounts for each student to provide a balanced in the reading program:

- Daily use of fiction and nonfiction trade books;
- Direction instruction and practice in guided reading groups;
- Oral reading by the teacher and students
- Word identification strategies
- Independent reading of high-interest books
- Writing and spelling instruction
- Ongoing strategic assessment;
- Language-rich classroom environments.

During guided reading, the teacher works with a small group of students who are similar in their reading level, guiding them through an instructional leveled text with lessons plans that are carefully planned before, during, and after the reading activity. As each child reads the text, the teacher's job is to listen, take notes, and support the reader as needed.

During the year, the teacher ensures that the students read texts that increase in difficulty as

they continue to develop their ability to read to themselves. Finally, the make-up of the groups vary throughout the year. Students move from one group to another based on the teacher's ongoing assessment and observation of their performance. While the teacher is working with a small groups of students, the rest of the class is involved with activities or literacy centers that provide meaningful literacy tasks (Linder, 2009). In a balanced literacy framework, adapting instructional practices to meet the needs of the reading students should be evident and be taking place with regard to the teachers' implementation of the guided reading rituals and routines. Guided reading rituals and routines are a foundational piece of effective literacy instruction, particularly in helping beginning readers and strengthening struggling readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Balanced Literacy Research

In 2013, Bingham and Hall-Kenyon examined teachers' beliefs regarding the implementation of a balanced literacy framework. Five hundred and eighty-one teachers from three school districts participated in the study. A majority of the teachers were female and they taught various levels (from kindergarten to sixth grade). The average experience was 8.5 years, and 146 had earned their master's degree. All of the teachers were working in districts where a balanced literacy framework was supported and promoted by the school district. The researchers wanted to see if the teacher's literacy practices were consistent with their views of the relative importance of the different skills (constrained/unconstrained or skill-based/meaning-based). They also wanted to see if differences in implementation was based on the teachers' literacy beliefs (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013).

Information was gathered via a survey. The teacher survey included four components: (a) the teachers' beliefs about key literacy skills that promote children's reading

and writing development; (b) beliefs about literacy instruction (skill vs. meaning); (c) the frequency with which they implemented the elements of a balanced literacy framework; and (d) basic demographic information. The components were described as:

- *Literacy beliefs.* This component measured the teachers' beliefs about what the most important literacy skills taught during reading instruction. They rated phonological awareness, concepts of print, alphabetic principle, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary and fluency. The teachers were also asked to report which skills they focused on during balanced literacy;
- *Beliefs with regard to effective reading instruction.* The teachers' beliefs about effective reading instruction were assessed using the Theoretical Orientation in Reading Instruction scale. They responded to 28 statements on their beliefs about reading instruction. The statements administered were written in such a way that they represented either a whole-language or a phonics-based instruction position. Teachers were categorized into three groups according to their teaching philosophies: Phonics, Skills or Whole Language. Teachers in the skills groups endorsed elements of both whole-language and phonics based instruction. The skills group appeared to have a blended view about effective reading instruction.
- *Literacy instruction.* Teachers were asked to report how frequently they participated in balanced literacy routines such as guided reading, read alouds, shared reading, independent reading, interactive writing, shared writing, guided writing and independent writing. Teachers were asked to respond to how many times per week their students engaged in each of the balanced literacy components.

- *Basic demographics.* Information was gathered from the teachers in regard to additional certifications they may have had such as reading, ESOL, early childhood, and special education. They were asked to share the grade level currently teaching and the number of years of teaching experience (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013).

The results of the research showed that 95% of the teachers embraced a skills-based approach to reading instruction. In order for teachers to score in the skill-based area, they must have agreed to statements that supported both Whole Language and Phonics values. Teachers who scored in this area appeared to have a balanced theoretical approach with regard to how children develop reading skills and how those skills should be taught (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013).

An analysis of the teachers' beliefs about literacy skills (phonological awareness, concepts of print, alphabetic principle, vocabulary, phonics, fluency and comprehension) that are the most important in assisting children in learning to read, showed that the teachers rated all skills areas from important to most important. Not only did the teachers rate comprehension as being the most important skill in helping children learn to read, but it was the skill they appeared to agree the most on in relation to relative importance. In contrast to that finding, results showed that teachers appeared to differ more in their views on the relative importance assigned to alphabetic principle in children's reading development and this skill was also rated the lowest of all the seven components (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013).

To examine the factor structure of the teachers' beliefs about essential literacy skill components, the seven skill areas were subjected to a principal components analysis. The

results of that analysis produced two skill components of constrained and unconstrained skills. Constrained skills consisted of phonological awareness, concepts of prints, alphabetic principle and phonics. Paris defined constrained skills as being those skills which have a limited long-term impact as opposed to unconstrained skills of vocabulary, fluency and comprehension which do have a long term impact (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013).

Research results showed that teachers varied in their implementation of reading and writing routines. Students most frequently participated in independent reading activities (4 times a week) and other reading activities such as guided reading, shared reading and read a louds occurred more than 3 times per week. Dissimilarly, teachers reported that guided writing and independent writing occurred barely 3 times per week and shared writing and interactive writing activities occurred only 2 times per week (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013).

Teachers' beliefs about reading and effective reading instruction were examined to see if the grade level taught, years of experience and additional certifications affected their viewpoint. Results revealed no significant effect on the grade level taught, years of experience and additional certifications, and the teachers' viewpoint on reading instruction (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013).

The grade level taught affected the value teachers placed on literacy skills of phonological awareness, concepts of print, alphabetic principle, phonics, and comprehension. The kindergarten, first- and second-grade teachers suggested phonological awareness, concepts of print and the alphabetic principle skills were more important in the lower grades while third- to sixth-grade teachers saw comprehensions skills as more important. The skills

of vocabulary and fluency did not differ significantly across the grade level teachers (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013).

The teachers' participation in balanced literacy reading and writing routines was also examined. Teachers who had more than 10 years of teaching experience engaged their students in interactive writing routines more frequently than teachers with less experience. Teachers with more than 10 years of experience also had their students engage more frequently in guided writing routines (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013).

There is still a gap between: (a) which literacy skills are considered the most essential to assist young children to help them achieve reading success, (b) teachers beliefs about quality literacy instruction, and (c) the manner in which teachers implement balanced literacy instruction in their classroom (as cited in Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013). The data from this research study reflect that teachers have a balanced literacy mindset. This research documents a shift in teachers' conceptualizations about effective literacy instruction and replicates findings from Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester and Moon Ro (2000) who discovered that teachers were consistently reporting a balanced view of reading instruction.

Shaw and Hurst (2012) conducted a study in a suburban school district to determine how teachers defined balanced literacy. The study gathered information on what components and structures the teachers emphasized, differences among the grade levels, how the teachers reported their implementation of the instructional components of balanced literacy, and whether their perceptions were reflected in classroom observations.

When asked to define balanced literacy, most of the teachers gave a definition of balanced literacy that was acceptable, but not all-encompassing. One teacher defined balanced literacy as a program that has guided reading, independent reading, shared reading,

word work, and writing. This teacher had an acceptable understanding regarding balanced literacy, but did not understand that balanced literacy is a framework, not a program, and did not know all the structures or components. Most teachers gave definitions that focused on structures such as guided reading and independent reading rather than the literacy components such as phonics vocabulary and comprehension. Approximately 10% of the teachers in the study did not understand balanced literacy and were unable to give an adequate definition. Less than 6% of the teachers involved in the study were able to give an exemplary definition of balanced literacy. One example definition given was, “Where students engage in classroom activities where they learn to read and write” (Shaw & Hurst, 2012, p. 4). The activities are based on literacy areas that include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. The components of balanced literacy include read a louds, shared reading, reading workshop, shared writing, interactive writing and writing workshops.

When asked what literacy components and structures the teachers emphasized kindergarten teachers used more phonemic awareness activities than teachers in other grade levels. As expected, phonics instruction gradually tapered off by third grade. In grades five and six, phonics/word study instruction focused on spelling and structure analysis. It is interesting to note that in the fourth-grade classrooms, comprehension was the only reading skill instruction observed. They did not observe any phonemic awareness, fluency, phonics/word study, or vocabulary instruction in the fourth-grade classrooms. Comprehension instruction was observed in almost all the classrooms, but vocabulary and fluency instruction were limited (Shaw & Hurst, 2012).

Mini lessons, writing process instruction, student sharing work, and grammar instruction was observed in all the classrooms. Handwriting lessons did receive less attention, especially in grades two, four, five, and six (Shaw & Hurst, 2012).

Read alouds were more common in kindergarten than in any other grade level. Shared reading was not observed in any of the classrooms. Guided reading instruction was used the most by teachers in first grade and not at all in kindergarten, fifth, or sixth grades. Modeled writing instruction and activities were not observed in any of the classrooms, and shared writing was rarely observed. Independent writing was the most commonly observed activity across all the grade levels (Shaw & Hurst, 2012).

Finally, researchers examined how self-reporting of balanced literacy components compared to the observed data collected. Teachers were asked to document how frequently they incorporated balanced literacy reading and writing components and structures into their classrooms. The teachers' responses were consistent in their instruction of all balanced literacy components and structures. About 10% of the teachers said they do not teach or rarely teach phonemic awareness is a developmentally acceptable practice. About 10% of the teachers said they never teach the writing process and 19% documented a lack of handwriting instruction in their classrooms. Roughly 13% of the teachers stated that they rarely implemented guided reading and shared writing (Shaw & Hurst, 2012).

The research conducted was for the district to make research-informed improvements in their district with regard to reading instruction. In the prior 2 years, the teachers of this particular district had been encouraged to implement balanced literacy with minimal professional development. The teachers of this district had acceptable knowledge with regard to balanced literacy and were implementing components of balanced literacy

instruction, yet there was an unequal distribution of literacy components and structures (Shaw & Hurst, 2012).

Chapter 3: Conclusions

Reading is essential for having success in our society. Because of the importance of reading, especially in the lower-elementary grades, having difficulty in learning to read affects a children's motivation to learn. Students need to acquire the knowledge, skills, and strategies that allow them to read, write, and to think critically (Zygouris-Coe, 2001). When a balanced literacy framework is implemented, teachers need to have a clear understanding of how the program looks, what the components are and, most importantly, how they will use the program in their classroom. A balanced literacy framework uses specific instructional routines such as guided reading, shared reading, interactive writing, literacy centers, and independent reading and writing (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2001). By using these techniques the instruction is intended to allow for differentiated literacy instruction and is set up in a way to help students gain access to developmentally appropriate literacy knowledge skills (Frey et al., 2005).

Districts that have implemented a balanced literacy framework found that the ideals of that framework were not being utilized properly because the basic understanding of a balanced framework were not in place first. Administrators need to have a clear mission, high expectations, a safe and positive school environment, ongoing curriculum development, a plan for maximum use of instruction time, regular monitoring of student achievement, and positive home-school relationships (Hoffman, 1991). Providing support for teachers, students, and families appears to be an integral part of a balanced literacy framework implementation. Parents need to understand how the program works, how the program differs from what was used previously, and how they can and need to support their child (Frey et al., 2005).

The balanced literacy approach is based on the idea that the instructor is an informed decision-maker. If this remains part of the foundation as the program is built, then the teacher will have the flexibility needed to make decisions about each child every day. Because no two students are the same, different tasks are used, and teacher experience and knowledge differ, educators must have a full repertoire of strategies for assisting students to develop literacy and know how and when a different strategy should be used (Heydon et al., 2004).

Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole (1999) found that the most effective schools had a clear priority of both the school and classrooms. Peer coaching, teaming, and program consistency fostered collaboration and school success. The effective schools had a systematic plan for ongoing assessments and that information guided instructional decisions. Early reading interventions also need to be present for the program to be successful. Professional development had innovative and systematic formats as well. Special education and general education classroom teachers worked together to provide small-group instruction.

Teachers need to understand that balanced literacy is a framework, not a program. The framework needs to focus on not on the structures of reading such as guided and independent reading, but rather on the components such as phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension. Additional components that need to be included are reading aloud, shared reading, reading workshop, shared writing, interactive writing, and writing workshop (Shaw & Hurst, 2012). Literacy teachers need to emphasize literacy through regular, uninterrupted periods of successful literacy experiences in a positive environment, which integrates reading and writing with realistic expectations for all students (Frey et al., 2005).

When planning for balanced reading instruction, kindergarten teachers need to plan differently than fourth-grade teachers of reading. Kindergarten teachers will need to include more phonemic awareness activities than the intermediate elementary teachers. The teaching of phonics will gradually diminish by third grade. In the upper-elementary grades, phonics and word study instruction will focus on spelling and structural analysis (Shaw & Hurst, 2012).

A successful implementation of a balanced literacy framework needs to have quality professional development. Administrators, teachers, literacy coaches, and other decision-makers need to have adequate preparation to implement balanced literacy. Professional development should be based on the current research, focused on improving reading instruction, and provide ongoing support. It should include opportunities for teachers to collaborate and develop instruction that is aligned with student performance and the school goals and needs (Taylor, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 1998).

Schools that implement a balanced literacy program need to remember that a balanced literacy program may look differently in different school based on student needs. All instruction needs to be based on student needs and ongoing assessments. Teachers need to be the critical decision-makers in the learning process. The instructional decisions made need to be based on research and reflection. Administrators need to play a significant role in creating a supportive learning environment and special attention should be given to ensuring that a complete balanced literacy approach is implemented (Zygouris-Coe, 2001).

Recommendations

1. As our district moves forward with balanced literacy, it is essential that on-going training opportunities be provided for literacy teachers. This would be achieved

through providing professional development opportunities where balanced literacy coaches model whole group and small group instruction or outside coaches are brought in to provide training for both new and veteran literacy teachers.

2. Staff development days need to dedicate a major portion of the day for the planning of balanced literacy instruction. Reading teachers will require time to collaborate with other teachers of reading, mindfully plan for whole group and small group instruction, review data collected and ensure that rubrics are designed to fit the needs for teachers to accurately collect data on their students for each leveled group and each unit of study.
3. When planning daily academic school calendars, administrators and those in charge of creating the schedule, need to remember that a key component of balanced literacy is providing long, uninterrupted periods of reading for the students. Blocks of reading that allow for students to have opportunities to read for extended periods of time is imperative to a successful balanced literacy program. Students who also require intervention services should not be leave during core reading instruction.
4. A balanced literacy framework requires teachers to be aware of struggles and growth of their student as the year progresses which mean keeping almost daily notes and records on each student. Keeping class sizes low allows the teacher to effectively manage the record keeping required for this framework. This would ensure that the teacher is able to have small groups comprised of 4-5 students each with a maximum of five groups to monitor. Currently, fourth grade classes

have six small groups with 4-6 students in a group. It has made the first year more difficult than it should be for the teachers due to learning a new program and keeping notes and records on all the students and groups. School districts that switch to a balanced literacy framework need to support their teachers in this transition by not overloading the class size.

5. Districts that plan to implement a balanced literacy program need a detailed plan prior to rolling out the framework. It begins with effective training for the literacy teachers and a plan for ongoing support. This plan should include how new teachers will be trained and what additional supports they will need to ensure the program remains one of quality literacy instruction. A plan for training substitute teachers should also be in place so that when the classroom teacher is absent, instruction and learning do not stop but continue to move forward. Districts that are mindful in their planning, prior to implementing a balanced literacy program, will be able to have students who are successful at both reading and writing.

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