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Balanced Reading and Writing

Reading maketh a full man.

—Francis Bacon

Reading is a complex process that takes several years to learn, and the more advanced aspects of reading, such as analysis or synthesis of ideas, take several years more. Readers come from a multiplicity of backgrounds, with divergent levels of knowledge, verbal skills, motivation, and reasoning abilities. How could there be a single method of instruction that would make every child a successful reader?

Nevertheless, new methods in the field of reading continue to be proposed. Some are new and well researched, others are recycled and renamed, and a few are philosophies without much to back them up. Although each method may contain worthwhile elements for certain learners or particular situations, many new ideas tend to be adopted wholesale. The information then filters down to classroom teachers in the form of mandates, one-day workshops, or teaching materials that arrive without explanation or training. Many teachers have had only a single undergraduate course in teaching reading and thus lack the background that might help them interpret new trends. Essential parts of the theory get lost, and some flashy component is all that is left. These flashy leftovers may become popular, but they are usually not rich enough in philosophical content to accomplish the complex task of teaching reading or complete enough to meet the variety of student needs. Teachers are tired of trendy innovations and competing theories and are looking for a balance of methodologies that is rich and flexible enough to meet the needs of all their learners.

■ THE READING WARS

The 1990s, when whole language advocates publicly battled with supporters of phonics, was one of the most contentious eras in education. Whole language was considered a meaning-based philosophy, while phonics advocates supported a skill-based philosophy. Whole language used literature-based basals (the word used to describe graded reading texts for children), children's literature, and shared reading of big books. Due to the literature base, which was not constructed specifically for reading instruction, the first- and second-grade books afforded relatively little control of vocabulary. The basals advocated whole-class, teacher-guided reading, followed with rereading in pairs. Systematic teaching of phonics was deemphasized in favor of a more contextualized approach to help students learn letter-sound relationships (Morris, 2005). Primary teachers especially were uncomfortable with competing theories, particularly when end-of-the-spectrum philosophies did not validate their experiences about how their diverse children actually learned. And they were especially uncomfortable about their slowest learners.

Parts of the whole language philosophy came to an end with the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Reading Panel, 2000), which compared years of research through a technique known as meta-analysis, a way to compare studies that use different research methods. Phonics found its rightful place in reading instruction once again.

Reading experts are now recommending a balanced approach. The most important outcome of the reading wars is that reading programs now blend both phonics and literature. That outcome, however, seems like a shallow resolution and fails to provide direction for teachers, either in *how* to combine phonics and literature or in how to teach reading in the intermediate and upper grades. Let's start with some background about combined methods and then move toward a more encompassing definition of balanced reading.

■ COMBINED APPROACHES

Reading instruction that combines elements of reading is not really a new idea. In 1960, Helen Robinson, one of the coauthors of Scott Foresman's Dick and Jane readers, wrote the following, which advocates both skills instruction and reading for meaning:

Neither is competence in reading acquired in a short time or by learning specific aspects of reading in isolation. Phonics is of little value unless it is a tool used consistently in recognizing words. Word perception is not an isolated skill, but a tool in securing meaning. On the other hand, thoughtful reaction to, and assimilation of, what is read cannot be effective without accurate word perception and acquisition of correct meanings. (p. 239)

In 1998, Timothy Shanahan identified 12 research studies that have influenced reading instruction. Included was the "Cooperative Research Program in

First-Grade Reading Instruction” (Bond & Dykstra, 1967), which compiled data from 27 individual studies of differing approaches to beginning reading, such as phonics, linguistic readers, basals, initial teaching alphabet, individualized reading, language experience approaches, and various grouping schemes. Shanahan reported, “These studies found that none of the instructional methods were superior to the others for students at either high or low levels of readiness.” But a big “however” was attached to his conclusion: “[These studies] did find that some combinations of methods (such as including phonics and writing with other approaches) were associated with more learning” (Shanahan, 1998, p. 51).

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Surveys of practicing teachers find the majority using eclectic or balanced approaches (Baumann et al., 1998; Worthy & Hoffman, 1997; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996). In a survey conducted by Baumann of more than 1,200 teachers of prekindergarten through fifth grade, 89% said they used a balanced approach, blending phonics and skills instruction with holistic principles and practices. They also allocated classroom time in a balanced way, spending moderate amounts of time on reading strategy instruction and moderate amounts of time in more holistic activities, such as reading aloud to students, independent reading, responding to literature, and writing. Eighty-three percent also balanced instructional materials with a combination of basal reading programs and children’s trade books.

It is apparent that combining phonics and literature is a part of balanced reading instruction, but how to combine them is not apparent. One answer for a cohesive approach is the whole-part-whole model of instruction.

WHOLE-PART-WHOLE MODEL OF INSTRUCTION ■

A long-standing concern about reading and writing instruction has been the isolated teaching of skills: phonics, comprehension, or any other type of literacy skill. Although children accumulated the skills, they had little ability to apply them during actual reading or writing. The whole-part-whole model provides a framework for integration and application of skills in context so that they become strategies actually used in literacy. I was first introduced to this idea in 1985 in *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, et al.), and Dorothy Strickland, prolific author and professor of education at Rutgers University Graduate School of Education, advocated this framework in 1998.

The whole-part-whole approach replicates the way people learn anything new. To start, students or adults need to see the big picture (the first whole), what “it” is and why it would be useful to learn such a thing. Then learners ask, “So exactly what do you have to do?” and they discover specific parts and skills that make up the whole idea. Finally, they are able to successfully assemble the parts into their entirety (the second whole). When the entire concept is understood, the details make sense and are relevant; they can be applied correctly within the overall concept.

The First Whole in Literacy Instruction

The big picture in reading, or the first “whole,” involves the idea that print represents spoken language and is used to communicate meaningful thoughts. Many concepts about literacy are learned by watching adults read and write. Children become aware of print in books, magazines, signs, notes, newspapers, and advertisements and on computer screens. By being read to, they learn the more formal language structures used in books, story structure, and genres of writing. They learn the power of a wonderful story, and they learn that useful information can be conveyed through print. The genres of writing are learned through wide reading and exemplars. Children learn that reading makes sense and serves a useful purpose. Although beginning readers cannot do all these things by themselves, they can see where they are going, what it will look like, and why they might want to learn to do it. When children learn this first meaningful concept of literacy, they learn that completing worksheets is not the primary goal of reading.

The Parts of Literacy Instruction

The parts in whole-part-whole instruction—the specific reading skills and strategies—need to be taught. For most children, these skills do not develop naturally, as speech does, or develop simply through exposure to print. Sometimes kids have unusual misconceptions; for example, most three- and many four-year-olds think the story is told through the pictures rather than the print (Strommen & Mates, 1997). Some do not realize that when the question says, “What do you think . . . ?” the answer is not in the book. Although some children learn naturally through immersion in a literacy-rich environment, most need instruction. Seeing a lot of “it” does not necessarily mean that children are going to “get it” by themselves. This is especially true for children who do not come from a background of literacy or who do not see the purpose of becoming readers.

Many children need **explicit instruction and coaching**. Explicit instruction, also known as direct or systematic instruction, includes letting children know what is being taught, why it is being taught, how they can connect this information to other things they already know, and how the procedure works. Explicit instruction provides enough sustained, focused practice to enable students to learn and use strategies effectively. These ideas from the explicit instruction model fit very well with the first whole.

Although children do learn skills, many do not have the background or maturity that helps them realize that they should transfer those skills to future reading tasks, that is, that they are supposed to actually use what they have learned. Explicit instruction not only includes specific directions and modeling for learning a skill but also shows children how to use the skill in actual reading situations. This idea from the explicit instruction model fits well with the second whole.

In explicit instruction, teachers explain, model, think aloud, demonstrate, and guide students to learn and apply skills. The teacher helps children practice the strategy in actual reading situations. It can be as simple as telling the child that *ch* sounds /ch/ and *chair* starts with that sound. Later, she might say, “I see you’re stuck on that word. It starts with the same sound as *chair* does, just

like we practiced this morning.” Or the teacher may say, “In order to make an inference, readers must use knowledge they already possess plus information given by the author. In order to figure out what Julie wanted, look at what Julie said and combine it with how she acted. How do you think she is really feeling?” The children’s attention is focused on a single reading strategy for enough time for them to learn how it works. This is different from just giving directions to complete a worksheet.

Instruction that is explicit and systematic is essential for some students to succeed (Pressley, 1996). Explicit instruction is especially important for struggling readers. Students with learning disabilities, English language learners, and many students who struggle with reading for a variety of reasons often find it difficult to infer a process or generalize a rule from a simple discussion or one or two examples. They benefit the most from direct instruction. Direct instruction at its best teaches strategies that help “make reading and writing more doable and, hence, less frustrating” (Pressley, p. 282).

Research does not offer guidelines about how much time to spend in explicit instruction versus how much in actual reading. Children’s needs determine how direct the instruction should be and how much instruction is needed. However, in a study of an urban school district that was adopting balanced reading, Frey, Lee, Tollefson, Pass, and Massengill (2005) found that although the teachers adopted many aspects of balanced reading, such as independent reading and writing, the amount of time devoted to instruction and modeling effective strategies seemed too limited for students with poorly developed reading and writing skills.

Skill instruction is not just for phonics. Students also need instruction in comprehension skills and how to apply those skills in texts. This is also true for the other components of literacy: listening, speaking, spelling, fluency, writing, and vocabulary. Not surprisingly, extensive research indicates that clearly defined objectives and teacher-directed instruction are characteristics of effective literacy programs. Explicit instruction does not preclude on-the-spot coaching, and it does not encourage mindless, rote learning.

The Final Whole in Literacy Instruction

The isolated teaching of skills has received much well-deserved criticism. Nothing is wrong with selecting a skill and working with it for a while until children learn what it is and how to do it. The problem has been that in some classrooms, the entire process stops right there. I clearly remember teaching a skill from a basal and then searching for an appropriate story in the book where the students could apply and practice the skill they had learned; skills and stories were never very coordinated. In a balanced classroom, skills are not decontextualized (taught or used out of context) for very long. Children need to move from knowing about a generalization to using that knowledge in a purposeful way (Strickland, 1998).

Children need considerable time to practice the skills they have learned. Skills won’t “stick” or be used seamlessly unless the children read a lot and have the opportunity to use the skills in real reading. (Of course, some need reminders that the upcoming story will be perfect to use the skills they just learned.) When they can apply a skill in a rewarding way, students will see why they learned the skill and how it is useful in reading.

Children need to read a lot. In reviewing various research studies, Allington (2002b) found that the higher-achieving students read approximately three times as much each week in school as their lower-achieving classmates. The classic study of out-of-school reading by fifth graders was carried out by Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988). Students at the 90th percentile of achievement read, on the average, 2,357,000 words per year while students at the 10th percentile read 51,000 words per year. The more children read, the easier it becomes.

Children need to read a rich variety of interesting texts: challenging books, easy books, magazines, informational books, series books, newspapers, and all the types of materials people find useful in their lives. If children see only practice materials, they may not understand the big picture.

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and made sure that students "received a steady diet of 'easy' texts—texts they could read accurately, fluently, and with good comprehension."

Children need sufficient time and practice to consolidate and unify reading skills if they are to use those skills purposefully and selectively. In real text, readers never use just one skill at a time. When skills are purposely used in reading, they become strategies rather than isolated skills.

Similarly, children need to write whole compositions for real purposes, use precise vocabulary to communicate, and speak and listen in real situations. They need lots of practice in all these skills too.

Teacher coaching seems especially important in transferring the skills to reading. In a study of low-income schools, Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (2000) found that teachers in the most effective schools were three times more likely to encourage students to use the strategies they had been taught to figure out unknown words when they encountered them in reading. This finding contrasts with practices in schools of lesser effectiveness, where phonics was explicitly taught but coaching was seldom observed. In a study of outstanding primary teachers (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998), the best teachers reminded children how the skills could be used in the children's writing and reading. Pressley et al. (2001) found the most effective first-grade teachers frequently reminded students to use previously taught word identification skills during reading activities. Coaching bridges direct instruction and application when students do not make the connection by themselves.

Although not everyone uses the whole-part-whole term, evidence from studies of outstanding teachers (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, & Hampston, 2002) shows the integration of skills and application.

Literacy instruction [provided by the most effective teachers] was exceptionally well balanced with respect to the elements of whole language—reading of outstanding literature, writing—and the explicit teaching of skills. Reading, writing, and skills instruction were very well integrated

in these classrooms. Although there were lessons dedicated specifically to certain skills, the skills instruction observed in the three best classrooms in this study was anything but decontextualized. The skills lessons were filled with reminders about how skills related to the children's writing and reading. Moreover, the children had many opportunities to use the skills as they read and wrote. (pp. 193–194)

The whole-part-whole model can be seen easily in the practices of effective teachers. "Moving from whole to part and back to whole again thus provides a framework for planning that addresses skills in a manner that is meaningful, strategic, and more characteristic of the way proficient readers actually use skills when they read and write" (Strickland, 1998, p. 8).

Teaching With a Whole-Part-Whole Approach

Teaching with a whole-part-whole approach requires considerable knowledge of ways to provide effective skills instruction as well as ways to provide holistic reading and writing. Coaching, knowing just when to give that reminder about using a skill, takes intuition or experience—which doesn't come with the teacher's manual. Integrating all these elements into a cohesive classroom takes skill too. Pressley, Roehrig, Bogner, Raphael, and Dolezal (2002) found that the most effective teachers integrated skills instruction and literature, in contrast to less-effective teachers, who had a skills block and a reading block without apparent connection. The more effective teachers also integrated the language arts.

Teaching with literature, rather than with basals, can be even more challenging. Unless a novel is assigned for independent reading, the teacher must determine the skills to be taught. Application is no problem. Most pieces of literature or content texts can be used for a variety of purposes, but some are especially suitable for learning a particular sound-symbol relationship, such as *Sheep in a Jeep* (Shaw, 1986); for learning cause and effect, visualization, or predicting; or especially for inferring and interpreting. Sometimes, teachers choose a particular story just because it requires making inferences, for example, and that is one of the standards that must be met as well as one of the skills readers need.

Since novels do not have a mandated or sequenced set of comprehension skills, as a basal does, teachers can use their professional judgment to match instruction to the needs of the class, which also requires keeping track of what has been learned and what still needs to be taught.

CONTINUING TO DEFINE BALANCED INSTRUCTION ■

Balanced literacy instruction is more than combining skills and literature, although that is a good beginning. To be a rich, cohesive, and flexible philosophy, balanced reading should include integrating the language arts, providing varying levels of support and intensity of teaching, and blending teacher- and student-centered activities. It is not just the presence of a variety of activities that makes a program of reading instruction effective or ineffective. It is the way

in which its pieces are fitted together to complement and support one another, always with full consideration of the needs and progress of the young readers with whom it will be used (Adams, cited in Stahl, Osborn, & Lehr, 1990, p. 122).

■ INTEGRATING THE LANGUAGE ARTS

If it makes sense to integrate reading skills and application, then it certainly makes sense to integrate the language arts—listening and speaking, word recognition, spelling, writing, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. The components feel less disjointed to both the teacher and the learners, and each skill enhances the others.

When literacy instruction is integrated in a primary classroom, a teacher may read a story aloud as the children listen and make predictions. They then discuss the story together, talking about unfamiliar vocabulary words. An aspect of word recognition based on the words in the story is taught and practiced. The story is reread with partners or in shared reading, with the support of the teacher, for practice and fluency. The teacher may explain the importance of sequence, and the children place sentence strips in order to retell the story. The students write about the story or about personal experiences connected to the topic. As they write, knowledge of decoding affects their spelling, and learning to spell influences their decoding. Children then orally retell the story to ensure they comprehend the meaning.

When literacy instruction is integrated in an intermediate classroom, the teacher may use guided reading for the first section of the story. Children are asked to read for a purpose and discuss both the content and the strategies they used to comprehend the selection. The teacher may model connecting prior knowledge to the selection and then ask students to try the strategy in the next section. Vocabulary words from the selection are discussed, predicted by context, or sorted. Students finish the story independently and return to the group to discuss the content. They respond to the story in writing by retelling from another character's perspective or connecting the theme to personal experiences. The first draft may be examined for logical paragraph structure. Students may use unusual or complex sentence structure from the story as a model to develop original but structurally similar sentences in their compositions. They turn a scene into a Readers' Theatre script (discussed in Chapter 5) and practice for fluency before performing, or they make oral presentations about related topics as their classmates listen and ask questions. Writing in particular is no longer an add-on when the children are writing about what they read. Teachers who have been teaching thematic units have known this for years.

Integrating the language arts places considerable responsibility on the teacher because integrated materials are not always available. Although publishers are moving in this direction, teachers often find themselves with a literature anthology, a spelling book, an English book, a variety of trade books, and perhaps a separate vocabulary or phonics program, each from a different publisher and each bearing no relation to the other. It often takes considerable time to coordinate materials and instruction. Perhaps nowhere is it more challenging

to integrate successfully than in first grade, when teachers are often faced with a systematic phonics program and an unsystematic collection of little books and trade books.

Nonfiction is finally working its way into the integrated curriculum. The style of writing used in expository text differs significantly from narrative text in organizational patterns, in concept and vocabulary loads, in the use of visual aids such as charts and graphs, and even in sentence complexity. Developing literacy with expository text takes considerable teacher support and direct instruction so that students will eventually be able to learn the content independently.

However, the benefits of integrated instruction are numerous. Children see how all the aspects of literacy are coordinated. They discover that what is learned in one area can be used in another. The teacher does not have to start each activity with new background introductions, and interest is already established. It is also more time efficient, and time is always a precious commodity.

LEVELS OF SUPPORT ■ AND INTENSITY OF INSTRUCTION

Balancing reading skills and literature and integrating the language arts make for a more unified and cohesive classroom. However, those aspects alone do not specifically address the diversity of children in every classroom. One of the surprising findings in Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi's survey (1996) of effective first-grade teachers was that instruction for struggling readers did not differ qualitatively from instruction for other students. The struggling students also had skills instruction and plenty of reading and writing activities. What differed was the extensiveness and intensity of instruction. In a similar study, special education primary teachers nominated for their effectiveness in teaching literacy were surveyed, and the conclusions were similar. It was not that they used different educational practice but that they taught with greater explicitness and completeness of skills instruction. Teachers meet the needs of diverse learners by adjusting the level of support and the intensity of instruction (Pressley, Roehrig, et al., 2002).

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Teachers are always scaffolding (providing support). When students learn a new skill, they require considerable support at first, but the support fades as the learner becomes more competent. It is easy to see the level of support being adjusted in first grade. At the beginning, the teacher assumes all the responsibility when she reads aloud. Soon, students participate in shared reading, in which both the teacher and the students read the text together. This progresses to guided reading, in which the students do all the reading and the teacher provides purpose setting, specific instruction, clues, feedback, and so forth. Students partner read, and finally they are able to read more difficult books independently.

In reality, the process is not quite this linear; support is adjusted daily and in different ways for different children. Children who struggle need continuing levels of high support and the most direct instruction. Those who have stronger

backgrounds often learn a new skill easily, so they do not usually require continued high levels of support.

Another way of adjusting support and differentiating instruction is establishing leveled guided reading groups, in which small groups of children who use similar reading processes and are able to read similar levels of text with support meet together with the teacher for instruction and reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Children learn best when the text is only a little challenging. Students who struggle with books that are too hard to understand have little chance to use comprehension or word attack strategies. It is senseless to think about balancing skills and literature if both are just too hard to understand. Continuing assessment ensures that students are matched to books they can read.

Intensity has two meanings. The first definition is the intensity of meaningful classroom instruction and activity. Students are constantly engaged in productive literacy tasks. Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, and Hampston (2002) describe it as high-density instruction and very little downtime due to transitions or classroom management issues. “The best teachers [in an effective teacher study] were masterful classroom managers. They were so good, in fact, that classroom management was hardly noticeable” (p. 192). Pressley et al. (2002) describe high-density instruction as the 90/90 rule, meaning that 90% of the children are on task 90% of the time. Allington (2001) recommends, as Pressley does, that lessons be paced to take advantage of every minute of time available.

Allington (2002a) provides the second meaning of intensity, viewing it in terms of teacher-pupil ratio—the smaller the better for students who are struggling. This means that the readers who struggle are in the smallest reading group, and students who receive special services should be in very small groups. These groups need to meet daily. He also suggests that specialists might consider longer blocks of time for fewer weeks per year to achieve the necessary intensity of instruction.

Maybe level of support and intensity of instruction are a little hard to fit into a definition of balanced reading, but if teachers don’t take these components into consideration, there is not much hope for meeting the needs of all learners.

■ BALANCING STUDENT- AND TEACHER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION

Successful balanced literacy programs combine teacher-directed instruction and student-centered activities (Frey et al., 2005). This last component fits quite easily into the definition of balanced instruction, and choice and autonomy are important in balancing the classroom climate.

In traditional classrooms, the teacher is the focus of instruction, and the content and sequence are determined by the teacher and state standards. This is not entirely bad. Adults have a broader perspective than eight-year-olds do for making informed decisions about the reading process, and adults understand the scope of abilities that a mature reader is going to need. But the teacher does not have to decide everything.

Student choice is also important. Interest, choice, and a degree of autonomy about daily activities are powerful factors in motivation, which affects the classroom climate. Students can choose books for literature circles or independent reading. Writers' workshop topics are chosen by the children. Many teachers provide choice about how students can respond to text. Even given the choice about doing the odds or the evens in an assignment is a big deal! Students can self-determine who will take the roles in Readers' Theatre or which spelling words they will add to their lists for all the ones that were correct on the pretest. Classrooms that allow for choice have a positive climate.

In a balanced program, many teachers choose a blend of activities and materials for direct instruction, and other materials and activities are chosen by the students. The ratio of teacher-directed to student-choice activities can be adjusted depending on the needs and independence of the class.

Balanced reading and writing solves the skills-based versus meaning-based dilemma by using a whole-part-whole approach, integrates the language arts, provides varying levels of support and intensity, and blends teacher- and student-centered instruction. It requires skillful and knowledgeable teaching and a great degree of creativity and ingenuity, especially when the materials that are available were not designed specifically to meet the purposes of balanced reading and writing. The rewards are substantial, however, when children understand the relevancy of reading and writing and explicitly understand how the processes work. They are able to see relationships among the components—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—because each is used to complement and reinforce the others. When children have some degree of choice and control, the classroom climate is balanced, too. Balanced reading and writing is a very strong model for instruction in literacy.