
Balanced Reading Programs: Exploring Their Essentials

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One unabridged dictionary lists 25 definitions for the word balance. Balance can mean symmetry, equilibrium, or harmony. In literacy education, balance is used to describe a way to teach reading. Some proposed a balanced approach to teaching reading in response to those who offer methods at one end of the reading paradigm over methods placed at the opposite end of the paradigm. What concerns are prompted by the intense debates over reading approaches? What is balanced reading instruction? What core elements comprise a balanced reading program? What can teacher educators do to assist their students in designing, implementing, and evaluating balanced reading programs? In this paper, four teacher educators present their answers to these questions.

What Concerns are Prompted by the Intense Debates over Reading Approaches?

For decades there have been professional discussions about which method for teaching reading is the most effective. Currently, proponents of literature-based instruction champion the benefits of embedding reading instruction within the contexts of quality children's literature, while proponents of skills-based programs maintain that effective reading instruction contains a strong phonics component. Recently, the debates have intensified and often take on the tenor of a war. Perhaps this intensity exists because the opponents perceive the spoils as nothing less than the literacy development of the nation's children.

Our concerns about the divisiveness of the debates are fourfold. One, "they appear to reduce complex issues to either/or propositions" (Moorman, Blanton, & McLaughlin, 1994, p. 309). At a time when the instructional challenges facing educators require a broader, more inclusive perspective of how to develop effective readers, the debates imply that improvement will occur if the "best" method is implemented. Consequently, time which could be used in more productive ways (e.g., considering how to accelerate the learning of low-achieving readers) is spent espousing the benefits of one method over another.

Second, the debates divert attention from students. This concern was evident in the comments of 14 educators who participated in a discussion of balanced reading instruction in one of the author's graduate courses. For example, one teacher said, "There are so many people [politicians, parents, school administrators] battling over which is the best method, that sometimes the kids are getting hurt." Another teacher explained that the needs of children are better met when teachers have a broader instructional perspective. "You have to take some from every [method] and put it together to really make it work and to meet everybody's learning style."

Third, the debates erode confidence in classroom teachers. Although teachers are frequently not part of the dialogue, they are often at the center of the dispute. One of the 14 educators spoke of the whimsical way change is imposed on them and the negative impact this has on perceptions of their effectiveness. "You know a teacher has been teaching a certain way, and she thinks she's doing a good job and all of a sudden they say you can't teach that way, you have to do [it this way]. . . . There's something about somebody coming in and saying you're not doing a good job and you have to change your teaching." The teachers also stated that the public disputes over the best way to teach reading erodes trust in their ability. One teacher declared, "We need supportive administrators and county office people who are willing to treat teachers as professionals, [to] believe that we know what is best for children, and [to] trust us. . . ."

Fourth, the debates often lead to false overgeneralizations and the development of faulty labels that prevent us from studying problems in real depth. For example, while we know poverty conditions can affect students' literacy development and success in school (Chall & Curtis, 1991), we also know that many children in nonmainstream communities (described as "impoverished" by some) know a great deal about literacy but that this knowledge is not recognized within mainstream school settings (Heath, 1983). Too often, we identify a problem such as poverty and its effect on learning without taking the time to understand

the children from these settings and know more about how literacy happens within these communities.

We see a need to reduce or eliminate one-way thinking. Discussions which put forth one teaching method or grouping strategy over another tend to oversimplify the complexities affecting both learning and teaching. According to the teachers whose voices are reported herein, the debates also erode perceptions of their own efficacy. Paradigm wars and the resulting dichotomous thinking about which method is best results in a myopic, narrow view of the task at hand. More importantly, they delimit teachers' efforts to provide instruction that meets the diverse needs of their students.

What is Balanced Reading Instruction?

Numerous definitions of balanced reading instruction exist in the literature. Strickland (1996) posed several elements of a balanced reading program. These include balancing a skills emphasis with a meaning emphasis, direct instruction with indirect instruction, content and process, trade books and textbooks, and informal classroom assessment and norm-referenced standardized tests.

Pearson (1996) wrote about the need to reclaim the center and described seven core characteristics of effective reading instruction. The seven components include looking for authenticity in all aspects of instruction, basing curriculum on positive and optimistic views of student potential, demonstrating and modeling literate behavior, scaffolding the learning environment for students, placing a premium on student control, building and respecting community, and looking for curricula connections to everyday life, etc.

As evidenced by these definitions, conceptions of reading have expanded over the past two decades. Reading once perceived as a perceptual task is now viewed by many as being far more complex (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991). In keeping with this expanded conception, we propose that reading instruction should balance the affective, social, cultural, and cognitive domains of reading.

The affective domain is grounded in the belief that both children and teachers should have voice in what is taught, in what is celebrated, and in what is performed in the classroom. Having voice in what occurs within the reading program impacts readers' motivation and attitude toward reading which, in turn, impacts their interest in reading (Ruddell & Unrau, 1991). Related to this is the need for respect and belief in children's ability to make appropriate choices in their learning. And, because of the diversity among students, there is respect for multiple ways of knowing and using information.

The social domain is supported by the belief that learning is enhanced when students have opportunities to interact with others as they learn (Vygotsky, 1986). Higher cognitive processes, such as reading, are "formed in structures that are transmitted to the individual by others in speech, social interaction, and the processes of cooperative activity" (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 29). Moreover, children who have opportunities to interact with others as they are involved in literacy events experience increased motivation (Fisher & Hiebert, 1990) and extended knowledge of the topic being explored (Wells, Chang, & Maher, 1990).

The cultural domain is grounded in the belief that literacy development is determined by students' cultural and linguistic history. Furthermore, our understanding of the influence of culture on learning requires us to understand that what constitutes "good literacy teaching" and "good literacy learning" in one setting may be very different in another. Literacy instruction, therefore, must build on the acknowledged "brilliance that students bring with them" (Delpit, 1995). Rather than following a monocultural view of instruction, teachers must listen to the stories of their students and the students' communities, help students make relevant their own skills and knowledge, and help students build on their experiences to display and develop literacy knowledge. This domain builds on the premise that all teaching and learning take place within a context, and to understand the processes of teaching and learning, we must understand the multiple variables that interact within the context—both in the school and in the community.

The cognitive domain is supported by several principles. First, skills and strategies can be taught and should be learned as means to solve problems (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1994). Second, students should be provided multiple opportunities to revisit concepts and to apply these concepts to new problems so understanding is enhanced. Third, opportunities for sustained thinking about complex information should be provided. Fourth, reading instruction should be situated in all subject areas.

What Core Elements Comprise a Balanced Reading Program?

As conceptions of reading have led to broader perspectives of what should be included during reading instruction, they have also led to broader expectations of what comprises a total reading program. Reading programs once confined to the instruction delivered during teacher-directed reading groups now extend throughout as well as beyond the school day. We identify and describe six components we maintain should be included if these expanded reading programs are to be balanced.

Goals, standards, benchmarks, and achievement targets should be articulated and used to guide the reading program: The outcomes that direct a reading program should be made explicit. Moreover, the learning experiences that enable students to acquire these goals at each grade should be identified. Then, how students' literacy learning continues across the grades should be illustrated. Furthermore, grade-level benchmarks and standards should not represent the minimum expectations for students. Remedial and narrowed expectations have led to decades of lessened expectations for many of the nation's children. Most importantly, we should articulate how all students are invited to participate in the school curriculum and how this curriculum is built on the language and experiences of the students as they acquire and enhance their literacy abilities.

To ensure a shared commitment and ownership in the delivery of the goals and outcomes within the classrooms, everyone in the school should be involved in their identification and development. Strategies should be designed to invite teachers, students, parents, and other community members to participate in setting the goals and expected learning outcomes. Such inclusion is vital if we expect the participants to acquire ownership and commitment toward meeting these goals. Additionally, incorporating a means for systematic reviews of the goals by the participants will ensure their refinement and viability, thus enhancing their effectiveness.

Learning experiences should be provided so learners can acquire knowledge about technology and mobilize their use of technology: The Atlanta Journal and Constitution (Kloer, 1996) reports that 40% of the population have home computers, more than tripling the 13% statistic a decade ago. There has been a 70% increase in on-line services to homes. The Washington Post (Bates, 1995) reports that the use of commercial computer services is up 85% and reaches 8.4 million homes nationally. The increasing prevalence and use of computers and other technologies warrants serious consideration of their place in a school's reading program.

Learners should have multiple opportunities to read and write: One distinguishing characteristic of homes from which early readers come (Durkin, 1966) and classrooms which develop motivated, engaged readers (Gambrell, Almasi, Xie, & Heland, 1995) is the multitude of books available to the children. Moreover, Piaget (1976) in his discussions of cognitive development maintains development occurs when children interact with the "object of knowledge." In the case of reading development, books are the predominant object of knowledge. Therefore, increasing the number of books in classrooms, schools,

communities, and home libraries and increasing the number of opportunities for children to interact with print are essential elements in a balanced reading program.

The children's interactions with text should also include multiple opportunities to write. Although the language of books and the language written by children share a common vocabulary, writing provides unique opportunities for children. Writing slows down the language process for children and thus provides them with opportunities to hypothesize, confirm, and expand their understanding of how language works (DeFord, 1986).

A variety of methods and approaches should be included: The first-grade studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967) completed 30 years ago found that the variation between similar programs was often greater than the variation between different programs. Many programs were successful when implemented by a thoughtful teacher who was committed to that method. Because no one method can provide all the resources a teacher needs, a variety of methods should be included. Inclusion of teacher guided methods (e.g., Directed Reading Activity and Directed Reading-Thinking Activity), self-directed methods (e.g., sustained silent reading), and collaborative methods (e.g., partner reading, choral reading) are essential. Inclusion of minilessons that remind or direct students' attention to information and maxilessons that provide more intensive, deliberate, and intentional reading strategy instruction also are critical. And, opportunities for students to participate in intensive (close) and extensive (varied) reading of texts should be included.

Variety in the methods used increases the resources available to teachers, thus maximizing their ability to meet the needs of all of their students. Variety expands students' opportunities to practice their reading in different contexts and thereby expands the students' understanding of print. Moreover, variety adds vitality to a reading program, which increases children's and teachers' interests in the reading instruction and enhances engagement in the learning process.

Provisions for struggling, average, and advanced readers should be included in the reading program: Successful reading programs are designed to meet the needs of children at all achievement levels. For struggling readers, this means looking for ways to accelerate rather than remediate performance and to ensure that the instruction provided for struggling readers is of comparable quality to that provided their high-achieving peers (Allington, 1995).

Average and advanced readers should also be considered when developing a reading program. Currently, much of the discussion in the literacy literature pertains to the low-achieving reader. As laudable as this attention is, a balanced reading program is directed towards enhancing all children's reading.

High quality assessments should be included: Assessment of student learning serves a variety of purposes. Some assessments provide useful information to school systems and federal agencies (e.g., National Assessment of Educational Progress), but are not immediately related to the day-to-day instructional decisions a teacher must make. Other assessments are less formal but provide more relevant information for the classroom teacher (e.g., informal reading inventories). Explicating purposes which must be satisfied and identifying assessments which are necessary to achieve them will better ensure that instructional needs of all students are met.

What Can We, as Teacher Educators, do to Assist Our Students in Designing, Implementing, and Evaluating Balanced Reading Programs?

As teacher educators, we must reflect on our role in preparing teachers who can design, implement, and evaluate balanced reading programs. Perhaps we should rethink the methods we traditionally use to prepare teachers. Programs that present and describe theories and then leave students alone to make the transfer of these theories to practice need to be replaced. What is needed are programs that immerse teachers in sustained thinking and reflection about theory as they engage in the analysis of problems and issues that will confront them as teachers.

Successful models that assist teachers to gain the conceptual understandings of literacy development and instruction exist. For example, Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993), a program designed for first-grade children who are at risk of failing reading, relies on a long-term teacher preparation program. The initial program extends for one year and incorporates demonstration teaching and monitoring of the teachers as they work with children. When teachers complete their initial year of preparation, they continue to participate in teaching and reflection experiences that extend their development as Reading Recovery teachers.

Risko (1996) has reported success with using videodisc cases with preservice teachers. The prospective teachers view multiple demonstrations of classroom instruction. As they discuss multiple issues and problems embedded in these cases of classroom happenings, they are

encouraged to develop alternative ways to analyze and interpret teaching and learning events. These discussions provide opportunities for students to reflect and refine their own understanding of literacy instruction.

Concluding Comments

For decades reading professionals have debated and at times warred over which method is the best for teaching reading. Often, when the debates become paradigm wars, others (e.g., school administrators, school boards) who have influence over how reading is taught choose sides. Frequently, teachers are requested to alter their instruction to fit the chosen perspective. When the paradigm shifts again, a change in instruction often follows. Decisions about how to teach reading appear to be based on whimsy rather than substantive information. There is evidence of this in several states. Ten years ago, many teachers were told not to teach phonics because children would intuit these fundamental understandings of language via interactions with quality children's literature. Today, these same teachers are being told that they will include one hour of phonics instruction each day. Where is the balance in either proposal? What role have we, as reading professionals, played in this lack of balance? Perhaps our own lack of decorum during these debates leaves it to others outside the reading profession to ferret out the substance from the rhetoric.

We realize that the proposals we describe in this paper are part of a growing body of literature about what comprises a balanced reading program. Perhaps, if we as reading professionals continue to call for balance in the teaching of reading, then others outside the profession will work from a broader instructional pallet when decisions are made about how reading is taught. The beneficiaries will be the students in our elementary and secondary schools.

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