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Using a balanced literacy approach in elementary schools

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Using a balanced literacy approach in elementary schools

Abstract

One of the most significant educational topics currently facing teachers and administrators is literacy education. Teaching children to read and write is fundamental to a student's success in school: School districts, administrators, and teachers are faced with a tough challenge when developing a literacy curriculum. What will their method of instruction be? The great debate among literacy scholars and professionals is whether to teach using a phonics approach, whole language, or balanced literacy. This paper will explore the concept and benefits of using a balanced approach in literacy education.

USING A BALANCED LITERACY APPROACH
IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A Graduate Review

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Abstract

One of the most significant educational topics currently facing teachers and administrators is literacy education. Teaching children to read and write is fundamental to a student's success in school. School districts, administrators, and teachers are faced with a tough challenge when developing a literacy curriculum, what will their method of instruction be? The great debate among literacy scholars and professionals is whether to teach using a phonics approach, whole language, or balanced literacy. This paper will explore the concept and benefits of using a balanced approach in literacy education.

Introduction

From the moment a student embarks on his schooling experience the path down literacy lane is set in motion. Students become submerged into learning environments in which words are everywhere. In the earliest of elementary school classrooms, students start to read in every aspect of their day. It starts with a search of a student's own name and then names of familiar friends and teachers. The student begins to explore the room for clues. Students explore the room looking for familiar letters, words, and pictures, anything they can use to help themselves get a grasp on what will happen within the four walls of their new room. Students begin to feel overwhelmed with the tasks ahead of them. As the teacher comes into view, the students rest assured their teacher will help them navigate through this brand new experience.

While the students are searching for clues in their new experience, the classroom teacher can be found in a very similar situation. She is observing the students, grasping any small hint she can. She wants to know more about each child's literacy readiness. The classroom teacher is closely watching children identify their names, reading words on a classroom schedule, finding letters, or pictures they recognize. During this time the teacher is frantically taking mental notes of each student. She begins to become overwhelmed at the task ahead. Each student is at a different point in their literacy learning. How will she meet everyone's needs and teach them all they need to know? As her administrator and literacy specialist come into view she relaxes knowing they will help guide her in this very daunting, yet exciting adventure.

Finding the best method for literacy instruction is of utmost importance for many educators. "Literacy is one of the most important components of schooling – arguably the

most important...”(Miller, 1998, p. 6). As a result, finding the best method is critical to implementing this essential component. For years educators have been in search of the perfect method for teaching reading and writing. Most recently the great debate has been between phonics and whole language instruction. Throughout the past several decades the term balanced literacy has become ever present in the literacy debate. The balanced literacy approach has been found by many to be the most effective way to meet the needs of all students.

What is Balanced Literacy?

Definition of Balanced Literacy

The search for a perfect method of teaching reading and writing has lead educators in many different directions. Throughout the last few decades the balanced literacy approach has taken the forefront in literacy education. A balance in literacy instruction simply means just that, finding the common ground in the best literacy instructional practices. Of course balanced literacy can also be defined in much more complex and comprehensive ways. Many different explanations can be found among literacy professionals and within literacy publications.

- According to McKenzie (2002), “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” (¶ 2).
- The Tucson Arizona Unified School Districts (TUSD) web page (<http://instech.tusd.k12.az.us/balancedlit/handbook/main.htm>) explains that, “balanced literacy provides and cultivates the skills of reading, writing, thinking,

speaking and listening for all students while recognizing and respecting their cultural, ethnic and academic diversity.”

- Miller (1998) has two definitions of balanced literacy “a compromise between two differing points of view, one that accommodates neither and seeks a middle ground that does not exist” and “an approach to literacy in and of itself, one that recognizes differential student needs as requiring a variety of instructional modes and resources”(p. 2).
- Rog’s, (2003) explanation of balanced literacy is, “we work to *balance* a wide repertoire of teaching strategies and learning activities to meet the needs of all our students. A Balanced program requires opportunities for reading and writing *to* students, reading and writing *with* students, and reading and writing *by* students” (p. 8).
- Lastly, reading experts Fountas and Pinnell (1996) address balanced literacy in a complex way, “It is a philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments by using various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control” (p. 246).

With many definitions of balanced literacy available it can be quite confusing as to exactly what it means to teach using a balanced literacy approach. In synthesizing the varying, yet similar explanations of balanced literacy most can agree upon one general definition of this complex topic: “Balanced instruction is a fine blend of a variety of teaching strategies and styles through scaffolding and personalized instruction that best

meets the needs of students. It provides a positive, print-rich environment where students' interests and opinions are valued" (Freppon & Dahl, 1998, p. 246).

The Great Debate in Literacy Education

The great debate in literacy education focuses on how literacy skills should be taught. "That question has put researchers and reading instructors at odds, rekindling a decades-old debate about teaching methods, about phonics vs. literature" (Frahm & Green, 1998, ¶ 8).

For many years there have been two basic instructional approaches that have presided over literacy education. These two approaches have gone by a lot of different names but most recently have become known as phonics and whole-language. "These approaches to reading instruction reflect very different underlying philosophies and stress very different skills" (Wren, S., 2001, p. 3). The phonics approach is focused on specific skill and sound instruction. "Proponents of skill-based or phonics instruction maintain that children are better able to decode words on their own only after learning how to decode letters, sound and letter groupings" (Arburster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001). The whole-language approach is learning to read through authentic materials. "Supporters of whole-language instruction assert that children learn to read similar to the way they learn to speak and the whole-language approach complements this learning process" (Cole, 2000).

Researchers have argued for years over which instructional approach is best for students, assuming that whole-language and phonics were incompatible. However, Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) suggest the following idea:

Successful reading instruction requires skill instruction, including phonics and phonemics, in conjunction with stimulating reading and writing experiences.

Therefore, balanced reading instruction in the classroom should combine phonics instruction with the whole-language approach to demonstrate skills and meaning and to meet the reading needs of individual children. (Johnson, 1999)

Assuming a balanced literacy approach is in place the next debate becomes what elements are to be balanced to create the best literacy environment for students. Can we assume when discussing the hot topic of literacy education scholars will always be at odds, maintaining a constant debate?

The “Great Debate” in literacy education has swung back and forth on a pendulum of sorts for many decades and is not as new of a debate as some may think. This debate in literacy education dates back as far as the 19th and 20th centuries. (Wren, 2001, p. 4)

19th Century. In the 19th century the Great Debate in literacy began. “Horace Mann criticized the Phonics-like approach to reading instruction that was prevalent at the time, describing letters as bloodless, ghostly apparitions” (Wren, p.4). Mann believed in a “whole word” (Wren, p. 4) approach.

20th Century. In the late 19th century and early 20th century the literacy approach swung back again towards phonics skill instruction. Materials used during this time were “McGuffey readers and Beacon readers” (Wren, p. 4).

World War II. Just before the Second World War, Dick and Jane books were introduced using words that were considered to be within a child’s sight vocabulary. (Wren, p. 4)

Cold-War Era. In the middle of the Cold-War era, Rudolf Flesch advised that the whole-language approach to learning or “the look say approach was more than rarely educationally inappropriate, he characterized it as a threat to democracy” (Wren, p. 4).

1980's. In the 1980's educators revolted against the drill and skill approach towards literacy learning and focused on whole-language.

Present Day. Scholars and educators are still at odds over the best approach to literacy learning. Many teachers today cannot say they explicitly teach either phonics or whole language. Today's educators have become eclectic in their teaching of literacy.

Differing thoughts on the approaches to teaching literacy have been and will continue to be around for quite some time. However to achieve ultimate success the focus of literacy instruction needs to shift from the teacher to the activities and materials being taught. According to Wren (2001) this debate "has been one of the most destructive forces in reading education" (p. 5). Students and educators alike have suffered through these debates. Robinson, et. al (as cited in Miller, 1998) very nicely declared the following.

The near-incessant bickering within the literacy community over what constitutes best practice not only does nothing to advance the field but has led to "closed-circuit" discussion among proponents of a particular perspective, individuals who are typically content to talk among themselves. When communication does occur across perspectives, it is frequently unseemly and conveys a negative message to the popular press, to the effect that the profession is hopelessly confused and internally incoherent. (p.7)

"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 as cited in

<http://www.earlyliterature.ecsd.net/balanced%20literacy.htm>).

Methodology

Literacy education is a topic of great debate among the public, government officials, and educational institutions. Locating information on literacy and specifically

balanced literacy was not difficult. Simply starting with a Google search, using the words “balanced literacy,” hundreds of links were available. Many internet sites were commercialized balanced literacy programs available for purchase. This information was not especially useful in learning about the positive effects of a balanced literacy program. For a further and more related search on balanced literacy, Rod Library resources were utilized. Using Jstor and Panther Prowler many articles were located. Literature from Rod Library, the West Des Moines Community Schools professional library, and AEA 11 were found to be quite beneficial.

As websites, journal articles, and literature were located a concise review of each piece of information was necessary. While reviewing information it was important to take into consideration the following: publication date, topic relevance, and the form of balanced literacy being discussed. A careful evaluation of all information helped to narrow the topic to be examined. Through research new ideas were presented, adding more elements to this literature review.

Literature Review

Why Balanced Literacy?

“Children come in a variety of sizes, shapes and colors. They speak a variety of dialects and languages. Even at the beginning of first grade, they vary greatly in their entering literacy levels. Children also come with a variety of personalities and learning preferences” (Cunningham, Hall & Sigmon, 1999, p. 2). Since there are so many differences in students, a balanced literacy approach to learning has become a highly accepted form of instruction. Focusing on teaching a balanced program allows educators to stop the pendulum from swinging and finding what works with many different learning

styles. It uses a blend of both phonics and whole-language in conjunction with many elements of best practice in literacy. Balanced literacy is a combination of essential instructional components needed to create a complete literacy program, a program that can reach and instruct all children. According to Cunningham, et.al.:

Some children are strong visual learners and can see a word once or twice and remember it forever. Other children are better auditory learners and can easily hear and blend sounds to figure out lots of words. Some children need a lot of structure and guidance; other children are very self-directed and learn best when they can choose topics about which they want to read and write. Some children like stories and fanciful tales; others want to read and write about non-fiction – things that really happened. (p.2)

It is important for educators and literacy professionals to recognize the reality of individual differences and the fact that all children do not learn in the same way.

“Educators nationwide are promoting a “balanced” approach to reading instruction in an effort to bring an end to the reading wars” (Wren, 2001, p. 4).

For years we’ve been hearing about the battles between phonics and whole language. Which is best? Where should we place our emphasis? The truth is we need both: strict compliance with one approach overlooks those who might respond best to the other approach. (Donat, 2006, p. 306)

Students need efficient instruction in phonics and experiences with rich literature of all forms. Activities designed to enhance meaning, understanding, and the love of literature is most beneficial to student’s growth and development in literacy.

According to Duffy, (1991, as cited in Metsala, 1997) “Our data strongly supports the position that teachers should be educated to blend perspectives, to weave together a variety of methods and contents, rather than to adhere strongly to one perspective or another” (p. 520). Highly effective teachers create an efficient blend of many literacy skills. Creating a classroom where all students are able and excited to learn.

How Does Balanced Literacy Improve Student Learning?

Scientists estimate that 95% of children can be taught to read. (Scola, B. 2002, p. 1)

Many studies have made it possible to understand how literacy develops and what methods can be implemented in order to increase literacy learning among children.

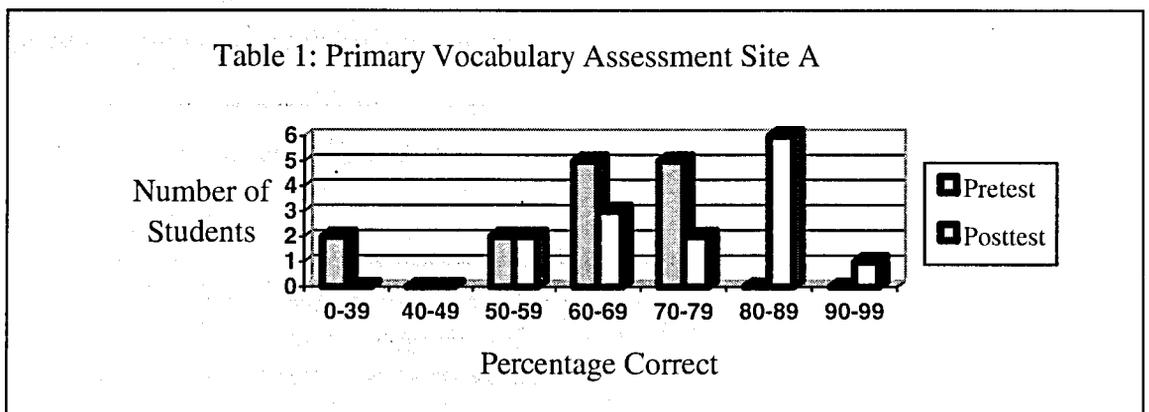
Balanced literacy has been found to be a highly effective means in increasing many literacy skills such as, reading, reading readiness, vocabulary development, and comprehension. The multilevel instruction of the balanced literacy approach, gives teachers a chance to plan instruction and activities across content areas that can meet a range of needs. (Arkebauer, MacDonald, & Palmer, 2002)

In an action research project completed by Mlakar-Hillig, Malvin and Troy (2002) a study was completed on improvements of vocabulary development, through balanced literacy techniques, in three elementary classrooms. The goal of their action plan was to “provide students with a variety of techniques to use to enhance their vocabulary awareness” (p. 36). Researchers found that students can better develop vocabulary awareness when there is sufficient background knowledge. Students learn best by linking unknown information with known information. Mlakar-Hillig, et al. believed that “engaging students in activities based on a balanced literacy model will enhance and activate prior knowledge. Increasing the ability to understand the concept of word meaning will motivate students to read, write, think, listen and speak more fluently” (p. 23). When selecting vocabulary enhancement activities, focus needs to be placed on activities in which meanings of words are integrated in multiple situations and use students background knowledge. One activity that can help with vocabulary development is read-aloud. Adam’s (1990, as found in Beck, 2001, as cited in Mlakar-

Hillig, 2002) noted that read-aloud is “probably the most highly recommended activity for encouraging language and literacy” (p.25). Information gained from read-aloud provides students with proper background knowledge, which aides in comprehension of more complex vocabulary. However, read-aloud is not the only activity to enhance vocabulary awareness. Involving students in direct participation, content area instruction, and cooperative learning are also excellent ways to improve vocabulary and meaning. (Malkar-Hillig et al., p. 27)

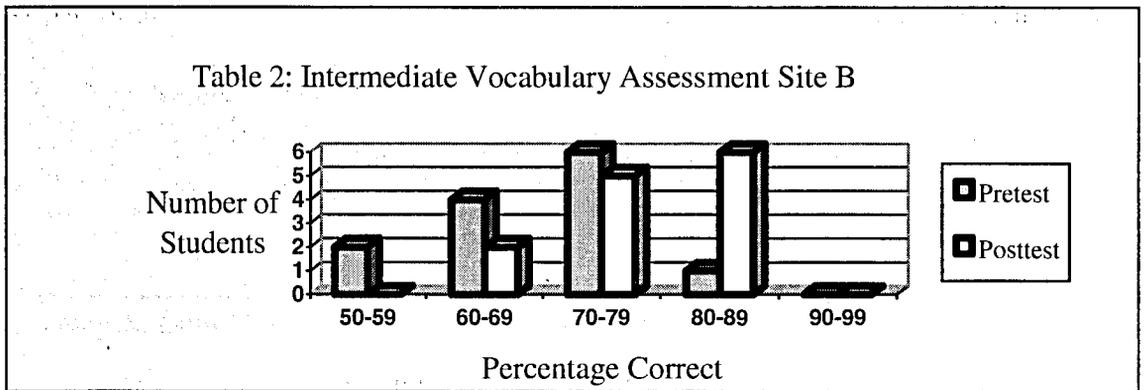
In their action research Malkar-Hillig et al. employed three measurable activities. They (a) surveyed parents and students about their reading habits and interests, (b) gave students pre and post vocabulary assessments to determine growth in vocabulary development, (c) introduced students to activities to enhance vocabulary learning, while teachers implemented lessons to address specific content area vocabulary (Malkar-Hillig, et al., p. 28).

Table 1 “reveals that the students at Site A improved their performance on the primary assessment test” (Malka-Hillig et al. p. 34). Site A students are general education first graders.



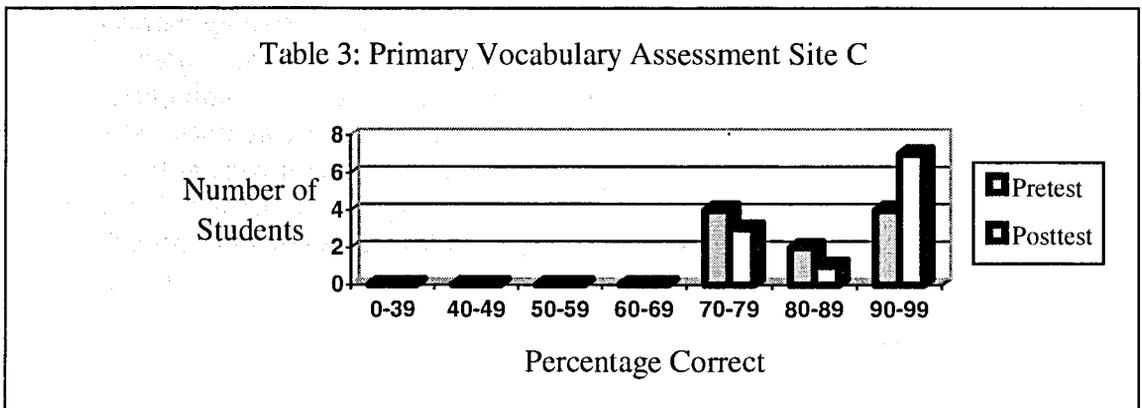
Note : From Mlakar-Hillig, M.E., Malvin, P. & Troy, L. (2002). Improving vocabulary development through Balanced Literacy. Un-published master's thesis. Saint Xavier University and Skylight Professional Development, Chicago, Illinois.

Table 2 reveals that Site B, a general education eighth grade class, improved on the intermediate vocabulary assessment. Improvements were not as great at Site B, but nevertheless gains were made.



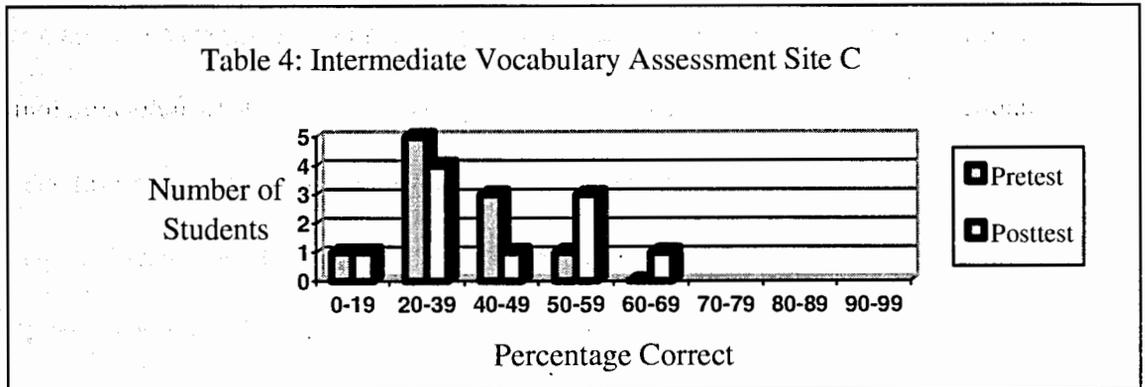
Note : From Mlakar-Hillig, M.E., Malvin, P. & Troy, L. (2002). Improving vocabulary development through Balanced Literacy. Un-published master's thesis. Saint Xavier University and Skylight Professional Development, Chicago, Illinois.

Table 3, shows an improvement in performance on the primary vocabulary assessment at Site C, a special education seventh and eighth grade class.



Note : Adapted from Mlakar-Hillig, M.E., Malvin, P. & Troy, L. (2002). Improving vocabulary development through Balanced Literacy. Un-published master's thesis. Saint Xavier University and Skylight Professional Development, Chicago, Illinois.

Table 4 reveals that students at Site C, seventh and eighth grade special education students, made minimal growth on the intermediate vocabulary assessment.



Note : Adapted from Mlakar-Hillig, M.E., Malvin, P. & Troy, L. (2002). Improving vocabulary development through Balanced Literacy. Un-published master's thesis. Saint Xavier University and Skylight Professional Development, Chicago, Illinois.

Reseachers, Malkar-Hillig et al. (2002) made several conclusions and recommendations as a result of the above assessments and time spent in each classroom.

In order to immerse students in a vocabulary rich in meaning, words were not taught in isolation. Multi-faceted activities for this action plan were specifically chosen. Students were exposed to techniques that incorporated a variety of intelligences. Balanced literacy techniques were applied to engage students in a broader understanding of work analysis. A weekly plan was devised to give explicit attention to acquire networks of new concepts through vocabulary instruction. Activities and strategies used to guide students before, during and after instruction promoted growth in acquisition of new vocabulary. Among the most successful activities applied during this action plan were cloze stories, Guess the Covered Word, Anticipation Guides, Graphic Organizers and elements of Writer's Workshop. All of these activities could be used across the content areas. (p. 40)

As a result of the multi-faceted vocabulary development activities across content areas students at all three sites showed improvement in word meaning and content area vocabulary.

Researchers Arkebauer et al. (2002) explored reading achievement strategies to increase reading development, fluency, and comprehension. The main objective of their action plan was to “increase reading achievement in the targeted first, fourth and sixth grade classrooms” (Arkebauer et al., p. 32). They used the Four Block approach which includes (a) Guided Reading, (b) working with words, (c) writing, and (d) self-selected reading, to improve literacy learning as well. Additionally, a series of reading strategies to encourage an increase in reading were implemented.

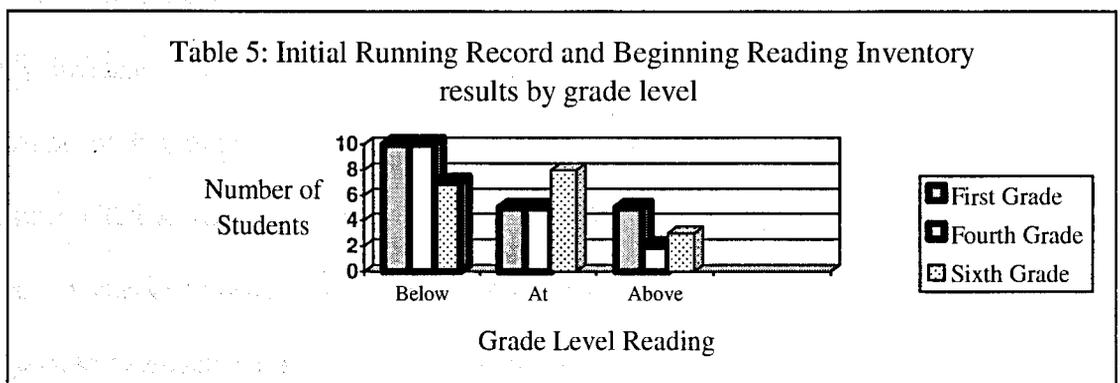
In each of the targeted classrooms teachers created a schedule implementing the Four Block approach. Along with a balanced literacy schedule, several new literacy approaches were introduced and implemented in each of the classrooms. Each activity introduced throughout the study was part of the Four Blocks Balanced Literacy learning approach.

- Introduction to reading strategies to help students focus on “main ideas, facts and details” (Arkebauer et al. p. 27).
- Exposure to RIVETS
- Exposure to making words lessons
- Creation of a literacy center to promote reading
- Buddy reading across grade levels
- Daily read-alouds
- Word work such as Guess the Covered Word introduced

Through their study and action research, Arkebauer et al. found that “reading achievement and motivation towards reading increased through developing a series of reading strategies incorporating through the Four Block Approach to Balanced Literacy” (p. 3).

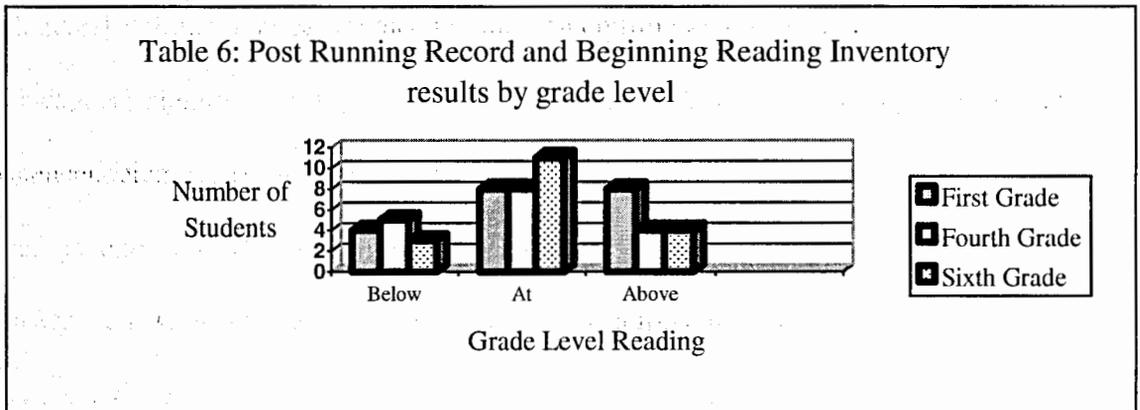
Several methods of assessment were used to determine the effectiveness of the Four Block Balanced Literacy Approach. Researchers used pre and post Running Records, S.T.A.R. Assessment of Reading, and a student attitude survey. (Arkebauer et al. 2002, p. 36)

The following charts show the results of each form of assessment and how the Four Block Balanced Literacy approach improved students reading achievement. Table 5 shows that more than half of the students in the targeted classrooms were below grade level at the initial test date, while the other half of the students were either at or above grade level.



Note: From Arkebauer, C., MacDonald, C. and Palmer C. (2002). Improving reading achievement through the implementation of a balanced literacy approach. Un-published master's thesis. Saint Xavier University and SkyLight, Chicago, Illinois.

Table 6, demonstrates the improvements in students Running Record and Beginning Reading Inventory results. The outcome shows that most of the students are now at or above grade level. Students made steady growth in their vocabulary and comprehension development. The most growth was seen at the first and sixth grade levels.



Note: From Arkebauer, C., MacDonald, C. and Palmer C. (2002). Improving reading achievement through the implementation of a balanced literacy approach. Un-published master's thesis. Saint Xavier University and SkyLight, Chicago, Illinois.

The S.T.A.R Assessment of Reading was given to students to show their growth after learning different reading strategies from the Four Block Approach (Arkebauer et al. p. 37). Results of the initial assessment demonstrated low scores in all grade levels. Results of the post S.T.A.R. Reading Assessment showed that students did not make much growth. Teachers and researchers had anticipated better results, they felt that “due to the holiday season students were excited about their upcoming vacation, causing them to not focus on the rest as much as the teachers desired” (Arkebauer et al. p. 38).

Teachers also administered a student attitude survey to see how students felt about reading. In the initial test results it was shown that students lacked confidence in their reading ability and were unmotivated to read for fun. This was a clear sign that teachers needed to strengthen students' motivation for reading as well as their confidence to read

well. Researchers worked with teachers to begin implementing strategies such as incentive charts, parent communication, read-aloud, buddy reading, and the creation of a literacy center to help improve students' attitudes. (Arkebauer et al. 2002) The results of the post attitude survey showed evidence that with implementation of the Four Blocks Balanced Literacy strategies a dramatic change in student's attitudes and feelings about their reading abilities occurred. According to Arkebauer et al. "teachers found the results were surprising and some answers when compared were almost exactly the opposite from when the survey was administered in August" (p. 38).

Arkebauer et al. (2002) believe that all of the activities implemented in the selected classrooms "proved to be great motivators to getting students to read and write more" (p. 43). Furthermore they believe that,

In order to broaden and strengthen reading, writing and motivation of students, all components of the Four Blocks Literacy Approach must be used. The Four Blocks Approach was a good program not only in developing strategies but also motivating students by engaging them in high interest activities. (p. 44)

It is essential for students to have a variety of literacy experiences in order to build excitement and motivation for learning. When students are motivated to learn the possibilities are endless.

"The National Reading Panel (1998, as cited in Kern, Kiningham & Vincent, 2002, p. 38) concluded many children do not know how to comprehend. There is a need to have comprehension strategies directly taught." Teachers need to give students specific instruction and model how strategies are supposed to be used, why it should be used and when students should use specific strategies. (snow, et. al 1998, as cited in Kern, et al. p.38)

Researchers Kern et al. (2002) conducted a study intended to increase reading and listening comprehension of targeted kindergarten and first grade classroom (p. 4).

Researchers found that teachers felt instruction in comprehension was challenging and they lacked enough training to properly teach students how to comprehend. Teachers also felt pressure from curriculum requirements and lacked enough time for independent reading and other literacy experiences.

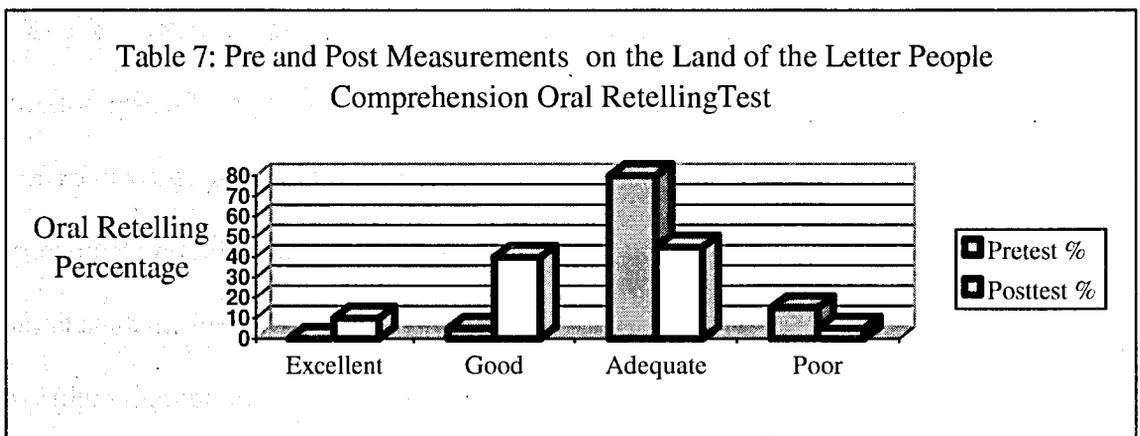
As part of the study, targeted classroom teachers worked to create balance in their literacy instruction, while implementing specific comprehension strategies. Kern et al. (2002) believe that, "The key solution to improving reading in early elementary children are balanced literacy instruction, explicit teaching of specific comprehension strategies, and teachers with high quality professional training" (p. 46).

As a guide for improving listening comprehension and reading skills, researchers asked teachers to include the following processes in their kindergarten and first grade classrooms:

- Use schema and questioning before, during and after reading, or listening to a story.
- Implement guided reading.
- Incorporate word analysis skills and comprehension strategies.
- Maintain a print-rich classroom environment.
- Provide time for independent reading.
- Conduct read-aloud daily, using quality literature

(Kern et al. p. 47). As a result of the newly implemented strategies and approach to reading instruction kindergarten and first grade students increased their reading comprehension:

Students were given a variety of pre and post assessments to assess the effectiveness of the intervention, as well as to evaluate their improvements in comprehension. Table 7, demonstrates the number of kindergarten students who could retell the story “without prompts (excellent); with little prompting (good), prompting with questions (adequate); and those who could not retell the story (poor)” (Kern et al. 2002, p. 58). Most students showed a gain in using listening comprehension strategies, as shown in Table 7.



Note: Adapted from Kern, L., Kininghman, B. and Vincent, S. (2002) Improving reading comprehension through the use of balanced literacy and specific comprehension strategies. Un-published thesis. Saint Xavier University and Skylight Professional Development, Chicago, Illinois.

Another assessment was used to assess first grade students listening comprehension skills and the use of schema. The results of this assessment showed that children improved in the use of schema, especially in relating schema to text. Gains were made in using schema as a result of time was spent modeling schema during read-aloud, guided

reading, and whole group reading instruction. “Children were taught three schematic connections and were asked to demonstrate understanding during shared and instruction reading times.” (Kern et al. 2002, p. 61).

“The final reading strategy assessed by the MPIR was the use of questioning to enhance the meaning of text” (Kern et al. 2002, p 61). A gradual advancement in the use of questioning strategies was seen. The most distinguished gain was seen in children’s growth from “posing no questions to using questions to clarify meaning” (Kern, et al., p. 63). Children were taught how to interpret text and clarify meaning both before and after reading (Kern et al. p. 62) which aided in their overall improvement.

The researcher’s results showed gains in questioning and schema to improve meaning as well as general comprehension strategies. Using balanced literacy reading lessons, while incorporating specific comprehension strategies, resulted in varying degrees of improvement for all students involved. Researchers recommend teachers model and instruct students in reading comprehension strategies along with a balanced literacy curriculum throughout all grade levels. (Kern et al. 2002, p. 65)

A balanced literacy program consistently provides many opportunities for varying reading and writing experiences. As a result students are able to develop their understanding of literacy in a format that best meets their needs. Balanced literacy provides students the opportunity to grow as literacy learners in all aspects of reading and writing.

Elements of a Balanced Literacy Curriculum

As explained earlier balanced literacy “provides and cultivates the skills of reading, writing, thinking, speaking and listening for all students while recognizing and respecting

their cultural, ethnic, and academic diversity” (TUSD,

<http://instech.tusd.k12.az.us/balancedlit/handbook/main.htm>). In order to accomplish

this, the main components of a balanced literacy approach as taught in a classroom are:

- Modeled Reading/Read Aloud
- Modeled Writing
- Shared Reading
- Shared Writing
- Guided Reading
- Guided Writing
- Independent Reading
- Independent Writing
- Vocabulary
- Word Work
- Literacy Centers

These several important components are needed to increase student’s literacy learning across a variety of experiences.

Modeled Reading/Read Aloud. In a balanced literacy classroom read aloud occurs one time each day for approximately ten to fifteen minutes (Wiencek, Vazzano, Reizian, 1999, p. 10). The teacher reads many genres of books to students. Through read aloud the teacher models expression, vocabulary, fluency, and phonemic awareness.

Additionally, comprehension and meaning strategies are intertwined into daily read-aloud.

Modeled Writing. Modeled writing is an experience for students to either observe or interact with the teacher as she composes a message. The message being composed can be created solely by the teacher or in conjunction with the entire class. After the message is created it is read aloud to help build meaning. Modeled writing is also known as interactive writing and does not need to take much time in a balanced literacy classroom. Modeled writing happens between 2-4 times a week and can last around 5 to 10 minutes (Wiencek, et al. p. 10).

Shared Reading. Rog (2003) describes shared reading as, “learning to read by reading.” “Shared reading enables students to participate in reading texts that are beyond their reading levels. More importantly, it accommodates a variety of levels of development as each child gains something different from the experience” (p. 11).

During shared reading the teacher reads aloud to a large group of students, most often this is a whole class experience. One large text that is visible to all students or individual books for each student can be used. While reading with the class, the teacher emphasizes specific skills and reading strategies. She may focus on “concepts about print, story structure, or text features such as rhymes, letter patterns, and punctuation” (Rog, p. 11). Students are encouraged to observe and join in when they are comfortable. The literature is read several times as all students join the teacher in a choral reading.

Literature being used during the shared reading segment of a balanced literacy day should all be of high quality and provide students with a variety of experiences. Poetry, repeated patterns, pocket charts, language experience charts, and a mixture of fiction and non-fiction reading materials lend themselves well to shared reading. Shared reading happens several times a week in a well balanced classroom (Rog, p. 11).

Shared Writing. In shared writing students are in control of generating the ideas for writing while the teacher acts as the scribe. As the teacher is writing “with” the students, she orally explains her thoughts involved in the writing process. (Rog, p. 9) This experience allows students to not only see but hear what writing looks like. Shared writing, which happens as often as possible, is believed to be a great model for students’ own writing experiences.

Guided Reading. “In Guided Reading, teachers choose material for children to read and a purpose for reading, and then guide them to use reading strategies needed for that material and that purpose” (Cunningham, Hall, Sigmon, 1999, p. 42). Guided reading instruction is done in small, similar ability leveled groups. According to Cunningham et al. “Guided Reading is done with all types of reading materials – big books, little versions of big books, basal readers, anthologies, magazines, multiple copies of trade books, and sections from science and social studies texts” (p. 42). All materials used are introduced to students at their zone of proximal development. Within this small group instruction teachers interact with students in skills of comprehension, fluency, phonemic awareness, self-correcting, and making meaning. Students read silently and out-loud, using many familiar texts and one new text in each session. Depending on the size of the class and student needs, Guided Reading lessons can vary in their instructional time.

Guided Writing. “Guided writing provides support for students as they practice their skills and knowledge. It may take a variety of forms, such as small group writing, patterned writing, or guided revisions” (Rog, 2003, p. 9). Students participate in writing experiences in which they respond to writing prompts, complete a specific writing task, or rewrite a patterned text after listening to and interacting with the story in a read-aloud

format. (Rog, p. 9) Guided writing is another experience for students to learn specific skills such as punctuation, phonemic awareness, capitalization, and story writing elements. Guided writing takes place several times a week with the teacher providing substantive support and scaffolding of the learners.

Independent Reading. In the independent reading segment of a balanced literacy curriculum students browse, read and re-read books for enjoyment (Wienczek et al., 1999, p.10). Books can be chosen from a variety of locations, themed book baskets, classroom libraries, school libraries, and Guided Reading groups. Students spend this time enjoying literature in a variety of genres and levels. Independent reading is an important way for teachers to help students develop a daily reading habit. Independent reading is a great time for teachers to model their own love for reading, as well.

Independent Writing. Independent writing is an element of the Writer's Workshop which can be found in many elementary school classrooms. In a lot of independent writing experiences students choose their own topics for writing and work individually with only minor teacher interactions. Independent writing is an experience for students to practice the skills and strategies they have learned throughout modeled writing, shared writing, and guided writing. Independent writing provides opportunities for students to share and get responses to their writing. Sharing and student feedback occurs in situations such as individual conferencing and the authors chair. (Rog, 2003, p.10) According to Rog "this element of the writing workshop is important in that it validates all children's writing and builds students' confidence in themselves as writers" (p.10).

Vocabulary. Vocabulary instruction is said by some, to be just as important as phonics and comprehension instruction. "Developing a comprehensive understanding of

a word comes through repeated exposure to the word in a variety of rich contexts”

(Biellimer, 2001, p. 145). “Knowledge of a word includes knowing how it sounds, how it is written, and how it is used as a part of speech” (Nagy & Scott, 2000, p. 31).

Vocabulary instruction occurs within literature where students can experience how a word sounds and its meaning. Additional vocabulary instruction provides students with clear definitions of words in a variety of contexts. Within vocabulary instruction it is important for students to have repeated experiences hearing and using new and important vocabulary words. Vocabulary instruction is especially important and meaningful for struggling readers and writers.

Word Work. In the word work segment “children learn to read and spell high-frequency words and learn the patterns which allow them to decode and spell lots of words” (Cunningham & Hall, 1997, p. 118). Time is spent introducing or reviewing several Word Wall words. Students discuss similarities and differences among Word Wall words and any spelling patterns they may notice. In each word work segment students are provided with an activity to guide them in spelling and decoding words. Different activities are used each day. According to Cunningham and Hall some of the most popular activities during word work are, “Guess the Covered Word, Making Words, and Rounding Up the Rhymes. Other activities include: Tongue Twisters, On-the-Back activities and Hink Pinks” (p. 118).

Literacy Centers. “Literacy centers are areas within the classroom where students work alone or together to explore literacy activities. Learning centers should provide ideas and materials that will help move students away from teacher-dominated learning and towards self-selected learning” (Rog, 2003, p. 23). Literacy centers can be

established in a variety of formats and be identified by several different names such as workstations or reading centers. In some literacy centers students work independently using a timer to guide the amount of time spent in each activity. In other situations children choose their own literacy centers and move to a new center once a task has been completed. Regardless of the format of literacy centers “instruction away from the teacher needs to be as powerful as instruction with the teacher” (Ford & Opitz, 2002, p 717):

There are many elements which make up the components of a balanced curriculum. Expert teachers find themselves including these elements throughout the school day, introducing students to many reading and writing experiences. Through a variety of motivating and interactive reading and writing experiences a classroom community of learners will emerge. Students will want to learn and have access to learn through the many facets of literacy instruction.

Implementing a Balanced Literacy Curriculum

Teaching all children to read is essential and can be done! “For most teachers, it is not the individual components of the literacy program that are challenging; it is fitting them together in a cohesive framework that promotes students engagement and achievement” (Rog, 2003, p. 12). Children do not all learn in the same way and to become good readers and writers children need a “balanced literacy diet” (Cunningham & Hall, 1997, p. 2). Children need a classroom rich in print, rich in strategies, and rich in excitement and motivation for learning.

Currently there are many marketable models of balanced literacy, such as The Four Block Approach.

The variations yet commonalities within and across these programs suggest that there are many ways to achieve effective early literacy instruction with a balanced literacy approach and rather than searching for the one perfect program researchers should try to identify the common characteristics of effective teachers using balanced literacy programs. While the components of the balanced literacy program are important, the bottom line in the research is that it is not the program but the teacher that makes the critical difference in the literacy learning of students. (Wiencek et al., 1999, p. 3)

There is not a perfect method when it comes to literacy instruction. Exemplary classroom teachers provide students with “authentic and diverse literacy opportunities,” they “integrate explicit skills instruction and opportunities to read and write whole ‘authentic’ text” and provide students with “immersion in authentic literacy-related experiences and extensive explicit teaching through modeling, explanation and minilessons re-explanations, especially with respect to decoding and other skills” (Metsala, 1997, p. 519). In classrooms of exemplary teachers there were simply more opportunities for continuous, meaningful reading, and writing than in classrooms with less skilled educators.

Excellent literacy instruction can be complex and requires time and patience to implement. Freppon and Dahl (1998) state that “good practice requires much hard work and extensive knowledge of many areas in literacy, and it needs support” (p. 247). When implementing balanced literacy approaches into classrooms, individual procedures and routines will vary, as well as the needs of the students and the daily learning objectives. (Rog, 2003, pp. 12-13) While there will be many varying procedures it is important for individual classroom teachers to maintain a consistent routine. A routine supports student learning and enhances the classroom climate. (Rog, p. 13) Students benefit greatly when they know what to expect when they arrive in the classroom each day and

teachers benefit from a safe and orderly classroom. Appendix A, provides an example of a balanced literacy week, with consistent routines and procedures.

“Balanced literacy is not a simplistic program to implement and the success or failure of such a program is dependent on each individual teacher’s ability to execute the program with her students” (Wiencek et al., 1999, p. 7).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Literacy is arguably one of the most essential topics in educational debates. Excellent literacy instruction is essential to a student’s growth and development not only through early elementary school but also through middle and high school. We know that students do not all learn in the same way. Due to the diversity among America’s students, one method of literacy instruction is not adequate. Teachers need to ensure they are meeting the needs of all students and not leaving any child behind.

I believe that a balanced literacy curriculum is the answer and best method for meeting the needs of all students. There are variations in ways to implement balance in literacy but the essential components all remain the same, reading, writing, and word work. Teachers wanting to create balance in their classroom literacy program need to keep these three components in mind.

My recommendation for teachers looking to begin teaching with balance is to first look at the needs of each student within their classroom. Once teachers are aware of the varying needs of students they will be working with, it will be much easier to set up a comprehensive and balanced curriculum plan. Next, it would be beneficial for teachers to look at their curriculum schedule with a clear and open mind, thinking about ways to incorporate more literacy into each part of their day. When making a daily and weekly

schedule teachers will find it helpful to look at several balanced literacy classroom schedules, as a guide for planning. Finally, it is important for teachers to choose the components they feel will benefit their students specifically. Those components need to be part of the daily routine. Additional Balanced Literacy components can be incorporated throughout the week or when extra time becomes available. Each year, as student groups' change and teachers become more comfortable using balanced literacy in the classroom more balanced components will likely become part of the daily schedule. A classroom routine using balanced literacy incorporates literacy through a variety of learning experiences and in a multi-level format.

After reviewing a large amount of literature I have come to the conclusion that there is not one perfect method for teaching literacy; instead I believe there are several excellent ways to approach literacy education. Excellent literacy methods, working concurrently will produce a literature rich environment and a community of eager learners.

It is time we stop arguing over the "right" method of teaching children to read and write. I strongly agree with Willows (2002) when he states, "Moving beyond the great debate and implementing balanced, motivating and effective reading and writing programs in the primary grades is possible" (§ 34). Educators need to take action and do what is best for their students. We need not waste any more time waiting around for educational professionals to tell us what we already know.

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Appendix A

Weekly Timetable

<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>
Book Browsing	Book Browsing	Book Browsing	Book Browsing	Book Browsing
Word Wall: <i>said, they</i>	Word Wall: <i>with, of</i>	Word Wall: review	Word Wall: <i>keep, put</i>	Word Wall: review
Buzz Groups: students talk to buddies about how they were named	Shared Writing: Name Poems (acrostics)	Shared Reading: S. Sliverstein poem; reread to enjoy rhythm, rhyme, meaning	Revisit Yesterday's poem to examine text features: rhyme, spelling	Big Book: <i>The Name of the Tree</i>
Modeled writing: lang-exp. Chart Shared reading: lang-exp. chart	Reread yesterday's chart	Modeled writing: revising and editing Name Poem		
Guided Reading Group 1 (Em) Group 3 (Er) Group 5 (Fl)	Guided Reading: Group 1 Group 2 (Er2) Group 4 (D)	Guided Reading Group 3 "cath-up"	Guided Reading: Group 1 Group 3 Group 5	Guided Reading: Group 1 Group 2 Group 4
Interactive Read-aloud: <i>Chrysanthemum</i>	Interactive Read-aloud: <i>Matthew ABC</i>	Interactive Read-aloud: revisit <i>Chrysanthemum</i>	Interactive Read-aloud: <i>The Name Jar</i>	Interactive Read-aloud: revisit book of students' choice
Writing Workshop: Week-end journals	Writing Workshop: Name Poems	Writing Workshop: illustrate and "publish" Name Poems	Writing Workshop: free choice	Writing Workshop: book response of reader's choice

From Rog, L.J. (2003). *Guided reading basics: Organizing, managing and implementing a balanced literacy program in k-3*. Ontario, Canada: Pembroke Publishers.