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## Best Practices in Balanced Early Literacy Instruction

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## Best Practices in Balanced Early Literacy Instruction

### Abstract

In order to provide the best literacy instruction for the nation's earliest learners, it is crucial that best practice principles, as defined by Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, be adhered to. These principles include all aspects of what have been found to be the teaching methods and strategies most conducive to successful early literacy acquisition. The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical and current trends in literacy education, discuss and explain the best practice principles, and to relate these principles to a current balanced literacy approach. Further, activities and lessons are presented which could be integrated into a balanced literacy program which adheres to best practice principles.

BEST PRACTICES IN BALANCED EARLY LITERACY  
INSTRUCTION

A Graduate Review  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by  
Suzanne Yoder  
November 11, 2003

This Review by: Suzanne Yoder

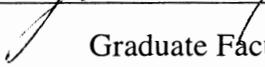
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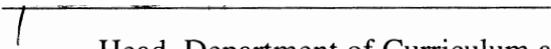
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Abstract

In order to provide the best literacy instruction for the nation's earliest learners, it is crucial that best practice principles, as defined by Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, be adhered to. These principles include all aspects of what have been found to be the teaching methods and strategies most conducive to successful early literacy acquisition. The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical and current trends in literacy education, discuss and explain the best practice principles, and to relate these principles to a current balanced literacy approach. Further, activities and lessons are presented which could be integrated into a balanced literacy program which adheres to best practice principles.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized that a successful early literacy program is critical to assure that future gains and achievements in education be reached for all students. However, over the years, there has been much controversy regarding the strategies and methods used in primary classrooms. Teachers frequently rush to embrace the newest trends, seemingly forgetting what has worked in the past as they develop completely different plans. Recently, Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde have developed a plan acknowledging several best practice strategies that should be used in all classrooms. By connecting these principles to the appropriate balanced curriculum, successful student learning is further permitted. The purpose of this paper is to explore historical and current literacy education trends, examine the new dimension of balanced literacy, discuss and explain the best practice principles, and to relate these principles to a current balanced literacy approach. It is, therefore, the hope of this author that educators will begin to understand the best practice principles, recognize the need for a balanced early literacy program, and use this information to evaluate their current methodologies and strategies.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED

The following questions will be answered within the literature review:

- What are the historical trends in literacy education?
- Why the need for balance in literacy instruction?
- What constitutes balance in literacy instruction?
- What are Best Practice Principles?
- What literacy components must be involved in a best practice classroom?
- How does literacy instruction impact other curricular areas?

- What are specific activities that should be included in a best practice early literacy classroom?

## METHODOLOGY

As best practice principles and balanced literacy programs were researched, four sources of information were used. These include journal articles available through EBSCOhost, a web-based information resource, journal articles and web sites included in the course pack from University of Northern Iowa's Methods and Materials in Literacy Education, course number 230:212, books obtained through the Rod Library at UNI, and materials from Grant Wood Area Education Association in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

Within the context of this paper, several terms require explicit definitions. The phonics or skills based approach to literacy is defined as "an instructional strategy used to teach letter-sound relationships by having readers 'sound out' words. (North Central Regional Education Laboratory, 1999, ¶2). Further, "phonics skills are taught in isolation with the expectation that once sound-letter relationships are learned, meaning will follow" (NCREL, 1999, ¶3). In contrast, the whole language, or meaning based approach, is defined as an approach to reading which "emphasizes comprehension and meaning in texts. Children focus on the wholeness of words, sentences, paragraphs, and entire books to derive meaning through context...Comprehension takes precedence over skills such as spelling" (NCREL, 1999, ¶5). " The whole language theory holds that learning to read and write English is analogous to learning to speak it--a natural, unconscious process best fostered by unstructured immersion"(Lemann, 1997, ¶7)

By combining aspects of both the phonics and whole language approach,

a balanced approach to literacy is fostered. Balance in and of itself is “a philosophical perspective about what kinds of knowledge children should develop and how those kinds of knowledge can be attained” (Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 100). A balanced approach to teaching of reading

requires solid skill instruction, including phonics and phonemic awareness, imbedded in enjoyable reading and writing experiences with whole texts to facilitate the construction of meaning. In other words, balanced reading instruction in the classroom combines the best of phonics instruction and the whole-language approach to teach both skills and meaning and to meet the reading needs of the individual children (NCREL, 1999, ¶7).

When one strives to implement a balanced approach, it is imperative that best practice principles be adhered to. The principles are defined as “good practice and best practice are everyday phrases used to describe solid, reputable, state-of-the-art work in a field” (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998, p. viii). Further, it describes “the professional conduct of individuals whose practice is based on current research and reflects the field’s latest knowledge, technology, and procedures” (Brighton, 2002, p. 30). In the field of education, best practice principles are widely recognized to be student centered, experimental, holistic, authentic, expressive, reflective, social, collaborative, democratic, cognitive, developmental, constructivist, and challenging.

As long as literacy has been a subject of study in American schools, educators, administrators, and policy makers have been riding on the “literacy pendulum”, swaying from the phonics approach (skills based) of literacy instruction to the whole language (meaning based) approach. America has even applied scientific management principals to reading instruction, thereby creating a reading basal, with the goal to “create a fail-proof, hierarchical program that would insure a time-efficient road to student mastery” (Crawford, 1997, p.9). The pendulum then swings, due to new research and methodologies, but also in part due to policy makers and textbook publishers, often leaving teachers uncertain about what to teach and how to teach it. Teachers instead need to ride the pendulum, learn new strategies, techniques, and materials while constantly striving to improve instruction through a balanced approach. It is imperative that through this balanced approach, best practice principles be utilized, resulting in a dynamic mix and an effective literacy program in which students gain local knowledge, global knowledge, and affective knowledge about reading (Fitzgerald, 1999). Further, this approach allows students to learn language, learn about language, and learn through language (Short, 1999).

#### WHAT ARE HISTORICAL TRENDS IN LITERACY EDUCATION?

As early as the late 1700’s, there has been a long standing debate over the best way to teach literacy to young children. Samuel Heinicke, founder of the first German institute for training the deaf, brought his beliefs to the debate, criticizing the spelling approach (phonics) to teaching reading. He stated that “The spelling method is a greater prejudice than burning witches and heretics...It is child torture-a slower and surer child-murder” (Graves & Dykstra, 1997, p. 342). In 1842, Horace Mann, then secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education, took the same approach to the current spelling/phonics based method. After

observing a reading program in Prussia where students learned by reading meaningful words and then breaking the words into segments, he compared it to the spelling method being used in the United States. He viewed the spelling method as nothing more than

calling up a single child, and while the teacher holds a book or card before him, with a pointer in his hand, says a, and he echoes a; then b, and he echoes b, and so on until the vertical row of lifeless and ill-favored characters is completed, and then of remaining him to his seat, to sit still and look at vacancy (Graves & Dykstra, 1997, p. 342).

For the next hundred years, American schools varied between different literacy instruction methods. Then, in the 1950's, the basal reader became a primary teaching tool and method. In fact, in a national survey of instructional practices, Ralph Staiger reported that 100% of responding teachers used at least one basal, if not more. (Graves & Dykstra 1997) These basals were developed by experts who believed that

the development of scientifically-based programs would insure that all teachers would be able to provide adequate reading instruction, simply by following the pedagogy outline in the program...These basals were given form, articulated, and dispersed through the vehicle of the basal teachers' manual. These manuals, which directed both the content and the pedagogy of reading instruction, served as the heart and soul of the basal program (Crawford, 1999, p. 9).

Publishers had organized basals that gave attention to individual skills and details while "providing the texts forms that force students to act in certain ways about reading instruction and to limit their imagination about what school literacies could be" (Shannon & Crawford, 1997, p. 231). Learning literacy, therefore, became defined as "students' movement along that hierarchal scope and sequence of skills

according to regularized schedule of completing daily assignments and periodic tests” (Shannon & Crawford, 1997, p. 231). Similarly, “teaching became defined as the presentation of basal materials according to manual directives” (Shannon, & Crawford, 1997, p. 231). This method seemed to work at the time, and although different publishing companies produced basals that did vary in scope and sequence, one relevant and underlying feature was “their laid-back approach to phonics instruction...phonics was typically taught as a back-up word identification strategy, one to be used only after meaning clues and word structure analysis were unsuccessful” (Graves & Dykstra, 1997, p. 242). While it is clear today that basals of this generation were not successful for students, they were the first attempt at the whole language sight word method.

Rudolf Flesch ended this trend toward basal agreement in his book, Johnny Can't Read, published in 1955. Here he criticized the basal approach with the following words:

Ever since 1500 B.C., people all over the world-wherever an alphabetic system of writing was used-learned how to read and write by the simple process of memorizing the sound of each letter in the alphabet...Except, as I said before, twentieth-century Americans...We have thrown 3500 years of civilization out the window (Graves & Dykstra, 1997, p. 343).

This publication set the pendulum in motion, swinging once again to a phonics based approach.

The phonics based approach to literacy instruction seems to have been the mainstay until the 1980's, when whole language advocates regrouped and once again, began to win the war. Frank Smith, former professor of psychology of the University of Victoria, and Kenneth Goodman, a professor of education at the University of Arizona presented whole language instruction as a “joyful, humanistic, intellectually challenging alternative to deadening phoneme drills--one

excellent teachers do not rely on a single program or method because they know that good teaching requires doing the right thing in the right way and at the right time in response to problems posed by particular people in particular places on particular occasions (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999, p. 11)

This principle is best described in Shirley Carson's article, "A Veteran Enters the Reading Wars: My Journey." She expresses her ultimate love of literacy through a timeline chronicling her own learning to the roads she followed to become what she terms, "a teacher of kids, not a subject" (Carson, 1999, p. 223). She has worked to make her classroom one of integrated and balanced instruction, thereby adhering to the constructivist theory of children creating their own learning by building on the knowledge they already have. She follows a holistic model, seemingly pulling the best strategies, tools, and practices from all teaching methodologies to "use literature and response, coupled with an early systematic teaching of phonics information within meaningful contexts [to] empower children" (Carson, 1999, p. 214).

In a student centered environment, the question that comes to the forefront is "Why use a balanced approach?" The answer is twofold. The first is that by utilizing a balanced approach, "individuals tend to see three broad categories of children's knowledge about reading as equally important: local knowledge, about reading, global knowledge about reading, and affective knowledge about reading" (Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 102). Specifically,

Local knowledge about reading includes areas such as phonological awareness; a sight word repertoire; knowledge of sound-symbol relationships; knowledge of some basic orthographic patterns; a variety of word identification strategies; and word meanings. Global knowledge includes such areas such as understanding, interpretation, and response to reading; strategies for enabling understanding and response; and an

awareness of strategic use. Love of reading (affective knowledge) includes feelings, positive attitude, motivation, and the desire to read (Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 102).

The second answer to “Why use a balanced approach?” is that by doing so, children have the opportunity to learn language, learn about language, and learn through language. Kathy G. Short cites the research of Michael Halliday, a linguist who studied oral language development. She states “Halliday found that in any meaningful language event, children have the opportunity to learn language, learn about language, and learn through language” (Short, 1999, p. 131).

Learning language highlights that children learn to read by reading and being surrounded by other readers...Learning through language highlights that reading is a way of learning about the world and oneself...[and] learning about language involves looking at language itself” (Short, 1999, p. 133).

Researchers have now shown that “for all children, learning to read and reading to learn should be happening simultaneously and continuously, from preschool through middle school--and perhaps beyond” (Robb, 2002, p. 23).

#### WHAT CONSTITUTES BALANCE IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION?

Ironically, the term “balanced literacy” began as yet another pendulum swing, first appearing in California in 1996. Due to low scores on standardized tests, educators pointed the finger again at whole language. A new curriculum, called balanced reading instruction, emerged, and was, in fact, mandated. (Asselin, 1999, p. 69). However, what originally began as completely structured and mandated, has now evolved to the type of teaching and learning in many schools today.

Although there are differing views of balance in terms of literacy instruction

balance in and of itself is “a philosophical perspective about what kinds of knowledge children should develop and how those kinds of knowledge can be attained” (Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 100). Through her research, Fitzgerald discovered that characterizations of “balanced reading instruction vary widely” (Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 100). She enumerates the following five points in her article “What is This Thing Called Balance?”:

- (a) combining or alternating certain kinds of curricula with other kinds of curricula;
- (b) combining or alternating certain kinds of instruction with other kinds of instruction such as learner and teacher-initiated instruction;
- (c) equally weighting curriculum with instruction where the types of curriculum and instruction have been viewed before as antithetical;
- (d) some multidimensional combination of all of the above; and
- (e) a unique definition of balance as a decision making approach through which the teacher makes thoughtful choices each day about the best way to help each child become a better reader and writer (Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 100).

Further, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory states

teaching of reading requires solid skill instruction, including phonics and phonemic awareness, imbedded in enjoyable reading and writing experiences with whole texts to facilitate the construction of meaning. In other words, balanced reading instruction in the classroom combines the best of phonics instruction and the whole-language approach to teach both skills and meaning and to meet the reading needs of the individual children” (NCREL, 1999, ¶7).

Another approach to balanced literacy is that it is “a set of beliefs, a perspective...not a singular approach or practice. There is no one right or wrong balanced approach, and likewise, there are many different manifestations of a balanced literacy approach” (Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 102). It is this researcher’s

theory that balance in literacy education is a system which takes all literacy components into account, while intertwining and using them simultaneously and cross curricular in order to create understanding and meaning individual students.

#### WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES?

The term “best practice” originates from the medical and law professions, where “good practice and best practice are everyday phrases used to describe solid, reputable, state-of-the-art work in a field” (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998, p. viii). Further, it describes “the professional conduct of individuals whose practice is based on current research and reflects the field’s latest knowledge, technology, and procedures” (Brighton, 2002, p. 30). However, while this phrase is used in high regard in the other professions, veteran educators often disregard this notion, even “denying the significance of current research or new standards of instruction” (Zemelman et al., 1998, p. viii). They instead use what works, what has always worked. This is rather like existing in a vacuum, or stagnating and, frankly, this belief needs to be abolished. “If educators are people who take ideas seriously, who believe in inquiry, and who subscribe to the possibility of human progress, then our professional language must label and respect practice that is at the leading edge of the field” (Zemelman et al., 1998, p. viii).

With this in mind, Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde researched national standards projects, research summaries, and professional association reports in order to develop what they regard to be the best educational practices in each of the key curriculum areas. They have developed a comprehensive list of recommendations taken from National Curriculum Reports from all areas which “begin to define a coherent paradigm of learning and teaching across the whole curriculum” (Zemelman et al., 1998, p. 4). The following list is

taken from the book Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools.

- Less whole-class, teacher-directed instruction (e.g. lecturing)
- Less student passivity: sitting, listening, receiving, and absorbing information
- Less presentational, one-way transmission of information from teacher to student
- Less prizing and rewarding of silence in the classroom
- Less classroom time devoted to fill-in-the-blank worksheets, dittos, workbooks, and other “seat work”
- Less student time spent reading textbooks and basal readers
- Less attempt by teachers to thinly “cover” large amounts of materials in every subject area
- Less rote memorization of facts and details
- Less emphasis on the competition and grades in school
- Less tracking or leveling of students into “ability groups”
- Less use of pull-out special programs
- Less use of and reliance on standardized tests
  
- More experimental, inductive, hands on learning
- More active learning in the classroom, with all the attendant noise
- More movement of students doing, talking, and collaborating
- More diverse roles for teachers, including coaching, demonstrating, and modeling
- More emphasis on higher-order thinking; learning a field's key concepts and principles

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- More deep study of a smaller number of topics, so that students internalize the field's way of inquiry
- More reading of real texts: whole books, primary sources, and nonfiction materials
- More responsibility transferred to students for their work: goal setting, record keeping, monitoring, sharing, exhibiting, and evaluating
- More choice for students (e.g. choosing their own books, writing topics, team partners, and research projects)
- More enacting and modeling of the principles of democracy in school
- More attention to affective needs and the varying cognitive styles of individual students
- More cooperative, collaborative activity; developing the classroom as an interdependent community
- More heterogeneously grouped classrooms where individual needs are met through inherently individualized activities, not segregation of bodies
- More delivery of special help to students in regular classrooms
- More varied and cooperative roles for teachers, parents, and administrators
- More reliance on teachers' descriptive evaluations of student growth, including observational/anecdotal records, conference notes, and performance assessment rubrics (Zemelman et al., 1998, p. 4-6).

Taking the above list, the authors then identified “thirteen interlocking principles, assumptions, or theories that characterize this model of education” (Zemelman et al., 1998, p. 7).

- **STUDENT CENTERED.** The best starting point for schooling is young people's real interests; all across the curriculum, investigating students' own questions should always take precedence over studying arbitrarily and distantly selected “content.”

- **EXPERIMENTAL.** Active, hands-on, concrete experience is the most powerful and natural form of learning. Students should be immersed in the most direct possible experience of the content of every subject.
- **HOLISTIC.** Children learn best when they encounter whole ideas, events, and materials in purposeful contexts, not by studying subparts isolated from actual use.
- **AUTHENTIC.** Real, rich, complex ideas and materials are at the heart of the curriculum. Lessons or textbooks that water-down, control, or oversimplify content ultimately disempower students.
- **EXPRESSIVE.** To fully engage ideas, construct meaning, and remember information, students must regularly employ the whole range of communicative media-speech, writing, drawing, poetry, dance, drama, music, movement, and visual arts.
- **REFLECTIVE.** Balancing the immersion in experience and expression must be opportunities for learners to reflect, debrief, abstract from their experience what they have felt and thought and learned.
- **SOCIAL.** Learning is always socially constructed and often interjectional; teachers need to create classroom interactions that “scaffold” learning.
- **COLLABORATIVE.** Cooperative learning activities tap the social power of learning better than competitive and individualistic approaches.
- **DEMOCRATIC.** The classroom is a model community; students learn what they live as citizens of the school.
- **COGNITIVE.** The most powerful learning comes when children develop true understanding of concepts through higher-order thinking associated with various fields of inquiry and through self-monitoring of their thinking.

- **DEVELOPMENTAL.** Children grow through a series of definable but not rigid stages, and schooling should fit its activities to the developmental level of students.
- **CONSTRUCTIVIST.** Children do not just receive content; in a very real sense, they re-create and reinvent every cognitive system they encounter, including language, literacy, and mathematics.
- **CHALLENGING.** Students learn best when faced with genuine challenges, choices, and responsibility in their own learning (Zemelman et al., 1998, p. 8).

The authors contend that this comprehensive list, “whether it is called best practice...or by some other name...is broad, deep and enduring. It is strongly backed by educational research, draws on sound learning theory, and, under other names, has been tested and refined over many years” (Zemelman et al., 1998, p. 7).

## WHAT LITERACY COMPONENTS MUST BE INCLUDED IN A BEST PRACTICE CLASSROOM?

Although the importance of a balanced approach connected with best practice principles has been discussed, it is important to briefly discuss characteristics of each individual component. When one thinks about reading instruction, the environment created in the classroom is as critical to the learning process as is the curriculum and strategies used. A student must be immersed in a literate environment, one full of meaningful print, and rich children’s literature from a variety of genres. Authentic literature, not basal reading programs, must be at the center of reading instruction. According to Patrick Shannon and Patricia Crawford, “the structure of basal reading programs and the assumptions such programs make about what reading is and how it is learned build failure for many students and take control of teaching out of the hands of teachers” (Meredith, 2002, reading instruction, ¶15). Clearly, the “best way to increase reading ability

is by reading authentic materials” (SIM, 1997, Free Reading, ¶1). Tommy

DePaola, a well-known children’s author, was quoted as saying

There is no substitute for real books. They are rarely boring or sanitized or squeezed into a ‘reading system’ that children can smell a mile off. So logic says if we want real readers, we must give them real books; give your people good literature, good art, and, surprisingly, these young people may do the rest (SIM, 1997, Rich...materials, findings section).

Further, in order to create ownership and meaning, students need to be included in selection of material and how that material is used. Ample time needs to be provided in order to free read, read with partners and groups, and be read to. Specifically “Free reading is crucial for the development of positive attitudes towards reading that are essential if students are to become lifelong readers” (SIM, 1997, Free Reading, ¶3) and “teachers who help children become lifelong readers...[by] increasing the time spent in free reading promote learning because children understand that reading is a satisfying and valuable activity” (SIM, 1997, Free reading, findings section).

As critical authenticity is to reading, it is similarly necessary to writing instruction. This is not to be confused with handwriting, but “authoring.” Even in the earliest grade,

“in a supportive environment, children do write, using invented spelling at first, combining drawing and text to tell stories, and taking risks without wording, format, content, and syntax...Writing helps children realize how print conveys meaning and what it ‘feels like’ to be an author” (SIM, 1997, Authoring, ¶2).

Susan Sowers wrote “KDS CN RIT SUNR THN WE THINK” (SIM, 1997, Authoring, findings section), and this is evident. However, students can only begin to develop their writing when they are working towards an authentic and

meaningful product. In her article “How do Author’s Do It?”, Heather Wall discusses how writing instruction must be explicit and teacher modeled, with ample time given for students to apply what they have learned. Teachers must demonstrate what they expect students to do by using specific methods, whereby quality authentic literature is the concrete model which allows students to make these connections. Further, “learning to write requires frequent practice. Teachers who create opportunities for students to write about topics that they care about, for varied audiences, and for a range of purposes help provide students with the practice they need”(SIM, 1997, Writing.. .process, ¶2). Students also need to be involved in writing for a variety of purposes and audiences, as “student writers need a variety of experiences in what author has called ‘talking to strangers’” (SIM, 1997, Writing...purposes, ¶3). As teachers provide this opportunity, they “promote learning because they enlarge their students’ understanding of the social context of language use” (SIM, 1997, Writing...purposes, findings section).

Writing, like all aspects of the literacy process, is cyclical. The more students write, the better they become at the process. The better they become, the more they enjoy writing. The more they enjoy it, the more they will write and the cycle begins again. Students will learn that writing conveys meaning and feeling. Teachers need to constantly be encouraging this writing as “teachers who encourage their students to write their own compositions empower children as literacy users and literacy learners” (SIM, 1997, Authoring, findings section).

The final link in literacy is word study. This, too, should be “an integral part of a holistic literature based literacy program.” In the earliest grades, word study begins with phonemic awareness. Phonemes are “the small unit of speech that correspond to letters of an alphabetic writing system” (Adams et al., 1998, p. 19) and phonemic awareness is “the awareness that language is composed of these small sounds” (Adams et al., 1998, p. 19). Research indicates that “measures of

schoolchildren's ability to attend to and manipulate phonemes strongly correlates with their reading success through twelfth grade" (Adams et al., 1998, p. 20).

However, many children lack these phonemic awareness skills, resulting in difficulty in all literacy aspects of education. What is promising is that "research clearly shows that phonemic awareness can be developed through instruction, and, furthermore, that doing so significantly accelerates children's subsequent reading and writing achievement"(Adams et al., 1998, p. 20).

As children become aware and competent of the phonemes in the language, the concept of word study moves to include the actual reading of those sounds to produce words. At this point, word study is often characterized as "phonics". While phonics and word study have the same goal, there are differences to the approaches. Phonics instruction has come

to be associated with direct explicit instruction based on strictly sequenced curriculum. In its most extreme form, this kind of curriculum: 1. is based on pure behavioristic learning theory-tightly controlled drills in which the teacher provides the stimulus, students respond, and either rewards or 'punishments' result from the response; 2. treats the very smallest units of language at great length before moving on to bigger units; 3. is based on 'synthetic phonics' in which words are built up from individual letters; 4. is often deductive and rule based; that is, it flows from a general rule to a specific case; and 5. is imposed from outside, with little teacher judgment or student choice taken into account (Meredith, 2002, word study ¶2).

Although similar in final product, word study takes a different approach to learning the letters and subsequent sounds and patterns. Word study is characterized by the following:

1. the constructivist learning theory in which students start with something already known and add new knowledge to their word schema by combining

the new with the old; 2. simultaneous combination of smaller and larger parts, based on what the student already knows; 3. ‘analytic phonics’ in which students examine whole words as the context for analyzing the parts played by individual letters in those words; 4. inductive or pattern-based learning; that is, students are prompted to see similarities or differences between words and thereby form categories upon which they can draw when attempting to read or spell an unknown word; and 5. a curriculum constructed by teachers and students, based on what is already known and how that leads to what might be learned next. (Meredith, 2002, word study ¶3).

Examples of lessons in the word study curriculum include word families, word wall activities, word sorts, and making words.

Although the three key components are reading, writing, and word study, it is also crucial that students be given ample time to listen, speak, and respond to what they read and hear. “Teachers who provide students with varied opportunities to respond to literature through large and small group discussion, through expressive writing, and through arts activities help students to deepen their understanding of texts and of themselves as readers” (SIM, 1997, Response to literature, ¶1). While speaking and writing play a significant role in students’ interpretations, these are not the only methods available. Students need the opportunity to “respond to literature through multiple sign systems. By sign systems, we mean multiple ways of knowing--the ways in which humans share and make meaning, specifically through music, art, mathematics, drama, and language” (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000, p. 160). This strengthens the notion of “transmediation”, or “the process of taking understandings from one system and moving them into another sign system (Short et al., 2000, p. 160), allowing students the ability to more completely understand.

## HOW DOES LITERACY INSTRUCTION IMPACT OTHER AREAS?

It is evident to all classroom teachers that literacy is critical in all other content areas. Reading and writing are process areas of study and while content areas strive to teach facts, figures, and information, during literacy instruction, children are taught *how* to read and write. Teachers model, scaffold, teach, analyze re-teach, and assess. However, this only leads to the greater goal of teaching the students how to *use* reading and writing to further their knowledge in those content areas. “Teachers who encourage their content area students to ‘write to learn’ through well-structured assignments and opportunities for expressive writing promote learning because they help students integrate content knowledge with personal knowledge” (SIM, 1997, Writing...tool, findings section). By incorporating literacy studies into other areas, students are given the opportunity to learn about the language as they learn through the language. The SIM web site states “...no one learns except by doing: in effect, using information precedes really learning it.” Student need to be allowed to use their literacy skills throughout the different curriculums, and by doing so, involve them in the “doing” and “using” of information.

## WHAT ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE UTILIZED IN A BEST PRACTICE EARLY LITERACY CLASSROOM?

What is presented in this section is a beginning list of what could be included in an early literacy balanced literacy approach which embraces the best practice principles. It is not an “all inclusive” list, but, rather, a beginning point that can be modified and manipulated to meet the needs of individual classes.

## Phonemic awareness activities

Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, and Beeler explain that “phonemic awareness in young children is divided into seven sets of multiple lessons” (1998, p. 18). The lessons include

- listening games to sharpen children’s ability to attend selectively to sounds;
- words and sentences to develop children’s awareness that language is made up of strings of words;
- awareness of syllables to develop the ability to analyze words into separate syllables and to synthesize words from a string of separate syllables;
- initial and final sounds to show children that words contain phonemes and to introduce them to how phonemes sound and feel when spoken in isolation;
- phonemes to develop the ability to analyze words into a sequence of separate phonemes and to synthesize words from a sequence of separate phonemes; and
- introducing letters and spellings to introduce the relation of letters to speech sounds (Adams et al., 1998, p. 18).

## Read aloud

“One of the best ways to develop students’ emergent literacy is to read interesting books to them” (Gunning, 2000, p. 31). Further, the Commission on Reading noted “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children” (Gunning, 2000, p. 31). Reading aloud helps students to hear the spoken word, develop a concept of story structure, fosters their comprehension skills, and allows them to make personal connections with characters. Students need to be read authentic literature from a variety of genres and be included in the decision of what to read.

Time should also be allowed to comment, discuss, or to further extend the read aloud.

### Shared Reading

Shared reading in the early grade is a process where the teacher models the process of reading and then students are invited to join in.

Shared reading provides opportunities to observe what fluent reading sounds like and how language works. Students use many skills in this process (word attack, high-frequency words, phonics, context meaning).

They are engaged in the process of reading and therefore feel like readers.

Shared reading builds on students' natural desire to read and reread favorite books" (Stinson, n.d., p. 11).

This process is designed to help students utilize word identification and decoding strategies while keeping the focus on meaning and comprehension and constructing meaning. In addition, the students are guided in exploring language while helping to foster their print concept (e.g. directionality, letters, words, sentences).

### Free reading

Free reading is simply allowing students to choose and enjoy a book of their choice. In the earliest grades, children can be taught that there are several way to "read" a book, as explained by Patricia Cunningham. They can pretend read by re-telling the story of a familiar book (e.g. fairy tales). Picture reading is accomplished by looking at a book and talking about all aspects of the pictures. Finally, students can read by actually reading some or all of the words.

### Cooperative reading

Cooperative reading allows students the opportunity to explore and interact with books with a partner or small group. By working with another student, each acts as a model and support system for the other. In addition, fluency, sight word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and confidence are enhanced. During the process,

they [students] read, listen, confirm predictions, correct miscues, monitor comprehension, utilize language and phonics skills, use higher level thinking skills, and share reactions to literature and articles. This progression fosters responsibility and leadership and a balance between interdependence and independence. The cooperative reading experience helps students bring meaning and understanding to the text and develops roots and foundations in the love and enjoyment of reading (Stinson, n.d., p. 22)

### Guided reading

“Guided reading enables children to practice strategies with the teacher’s support, and leads to independent silent reading” (Fountas & Pinell, 1996, p.1). It is part of a balanced literacy program that embodies the teachers actually showing children how to read and supporting them as they do so. Guided reading is a program which

- gives children the opportunity to develop as individual readers while participating in a socially supported activity
- gives teachers the opportunity to observe individuals as they process new texts
- gives individual readers the opportunity to develop reading strategies so that they can read increasingly difficult texts independently

- gives children enjoyable, successful experiences in reading for meaning
- develops the abilities needed for independent reading, and,
- helps children learn how to introduce texts to themselves (Fountas & Pinell, 1996, p. 2)

During a guided reading session, a teacher works with a small group of students who are able to read similar levels of text. These groups are fluid and ever changing. The teacher supports each reader's development while helping them to "use and develop strategies 'on the run'" (Fountas & Pinell, 1996, p. 2). The ultimate goal of guided reading is to support students as they become successful independent readers.

### Writers workshop

Writing workshops have been found to "be a superior instructional strategy for letting the [writing] process play out naturally in the classroom" (Meredith, 2002, writing instruction, ¶6). The writing workshop time is devoted to assisting students as they go through various steps in the writing process including

- Pre-writing--getting ready to write, having something to say to an intended audience
- Writing--first draft, first attempt to get the ideas and content down on paper
- Revising--revisiting the first draft, fixing the ideas and content, adding, deleting, rearranging, etc. (Revising is often aided by getting a response from a reader, who comment and critiques)
- Editing--fixing the format--spelling, punctuation, grammar, overall physical appearance of the writing (editing can also be aided by having a reader take a look at the writing)
- Publishing--presenting the finished piece to its intended audience (Meredith, 2002).

It is important to note that this writing process does not necessarily occur in a linear fashion. Typically, the workshops consist of a whole class mini-lesson where the teacher directly teaches the students an aspect of the writing process impacting all students. This time is followed by writing time, and the workshop usually concludes with a sharing time, often called “Author’s Chair”.

### Reflective journal writing

Reflective or journal writing is simply time set aside each day for students to write what is relevant in their life at that time. The intended audience is usually those close to the students (teachers, family, friends), however, it may be that the only audience are the student themselves. Students are encouraged to develop their own topic, however, the teacher may at times give a prompt. During this writing, students are simply getting their thoughts down on paper, in essence writing for writing’s sake. Invented spelling is encouraged and other writing conventions are not stressed as much as structured writing assignments. Frequently during this time, the teacher will do individual mini-lessons based on a student’s writing or ability level.

### Interactive writing

Interactive writing is a process whereby students and teacher work together to create a writing piece.

The children take an active role in the writing process by actually holding the pen and doing the writing. The teacher’s role [is to] scaffold and explicate the children’s emerging knowledge about print. Children “are active constructors of their own language and literacy. Their competence grows as they gain inner control over constructing meaning from print (Buttun, Johnson, & Furgerson, 1996, p. 447).

Students use invented spelling, copy from environment print (e.g. word wall) and utilize their own knowledge of words. Further, this process encourages students to take risks while working together and being “scaffolded” by the teacher and peers. This technique allows students time to practice a skill in the group setting before translating that skill into individual writing. Simply put, “interactive writing provides an authentic means for instruction in phonics and other linguistic patterns within the context of meaningful text” (Button et al., 1996, p. 453).

### Word Wall

The word wall is an interactive and hands-on method of viewing and working with individual words. It is usually made on a bulletin board, but can work on a series of posters, on cabinets, or any other location that allows students to easily view it. While there are some commercial word walls available, it is much more authentic if the words included on this wall are high-frequency words that the students have encountered in the real context of the classroom. Vocabulary words from literature stories, science lessons, social studies materials, etc. are good choices. Words are placed on the wall under their beginning letter. If the students are able to manipulate the words, the wall is further enhanced as students work with the words to build sentences, alphabetize, or take the words back to their seats to use in the context of their own personal writing. In addition, students may keep their own individual word walls or mini dictionaries.

### Word Sorts or Making Words

Making words lessons are “hand-on, minds-on manipulative activities in which students discover how our English spelling system works” (Cunningham, 2000, p. 6). Students are given a limited number of letters or letter tiles (usually 5-10) and guided through the manipulation of those letters in order to make everyday

words which help them discover patterns. The order the words are presented is not random, but rather

lead students through “predictable things [that] happen to a word when you change the first letter, the last letter, or the vowel. They need to realize that the order of the letters is crucial, and that when they “move the letters around”, **rat** becomes **tar** and then **art**. They need to learn that you change **bit** to **bite** and **not** to **note** by adding that ever important e. Likewise, **ran** become **rain** and **cot** becomes **coat** when vowels you don’t hear are added (Cunningham, 2000, p. 6).

This process and activity further helps children by introducing them to word families, which fosters students’ abilities “to hear, see, and use the rime as a reliable cure for reading new words and spelling words that sound alike [which] offers students a powerful insight into how English spelling works” (Johnston, 1999, p. 64).

## CONCLUSION

In order to have a successful early literacy program, reading, writing, word study, listening, and speaking must all be part of a balanced, best practice literacy program in a classroom. “Teachers who provide students with integrated English language arts instruction through the creation of a literate environment promote learning because they use the interrelated processes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening for authentic communication” (SIM , 1997, Literate environment, findings section). It is through this approach that teachers do what is needed for every student. It is also where the art of teaching comes into play; all teachers need time to learn the literacy process (including reading, writing, and word study), teach that process to students, assess the progress, reflect on what worked and what did not, make the necessary modifications and adaptations, and re-teach. It is

here that the swinging pendulum is disregarded and the concept of the upwards spiral be embraced. By teaching the mandated curriculum but also adding aspects of other processes, methodologies, and best practice principles, the teacher is constantly striving to best meet the students' needs. The teacher's toolbox must be filled with tools representing strategies for all situations and every need. By bringing in this dynamic mix, an excellent balanced literacy program results. Duffy and Hoffman explain; literacy "instruction effectiveness lies not with a single program or method, but, rather, with a teacher who thoughtfully and analytically integrates various programs, materials and methods as the situation demands" (Duffy, 1999, p. 11).

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