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## ABSTRACT

Frank Smith (1988) describes a "literacy club" as a classroom where no child is excluded from a wealth of reading and writing activities. One teacher, in designing a literacy club for his classroom, wanted to use a "balanced literacy" approach because using such an approach would allow him to incorporate many different perspectives that have worked in the past, and not force him to take a side in the long-going debate between phonics versus whole language. The program he designed: puts literature at the center of the program; involves both reading and writing to develop students' lifelong interest in both; teaches skills and strategies directly and indirectly; seeks to have students learn word recognition, vocabulary, and comprehension through reading; and wants students to express themselves through writing, using correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The unit of instruction he designed for grade 1 is built around the theme "Animals in Literature." Literacy instruction is organized to include four different instructional approaches: literature focus units; literature circles; reading and writing workshop; and basal reading programs. In the literature focus unit, Caldecott Medal books are read together, and in the literature circles the students select the books they want to read. The last part of the language arts period is dedicated to reading and writing workshop. The reading and writing processes are central to the balanced program, and the teacher tries to connect the two as much as possible. Assessment procedures are performance-based and tied directly to reading and writing activities rather than tests. The classroom is a print-rich environment, and the teacher's classroom philosophy is to maintain his literacy club by allowing students lots of time for reading. (NKA)

# Creating a "Literacy Club" in a First Grade Classroom: One Teacher's Balanced Approach.

by John Purcell

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## **Creating a “Literacy Club” in a First Grade Classroom: One Teacher’s Balanced Approach**

**by John Purcell**

Smith (1988) describes a “literacy club” as a classroom where no child is excluded from a wealth of reading and writing activities. The teacher’s role is to make sure that the club exists and that no child is excluded. In designing a literacy club in my classroom, I wanted to use a “balanced literacy” approach because such an approach would allow me to incorporate many different perspectives that have worked in the past. I would not be forced to take a side in the long-going debate between phonics versus whole language. I could balance both these approaches along with other approaches that I saw fit to help my students.

There were many things I wanted to make sure I covered when I designed my balanced program. I put literature at the center of my program. My program involves both reading and writing with the goal to make my students develop a lifelong interest in both of these areas. I want my students to apply their reading and writing skills into the other content areas outside language arts. I want to teach my students skills and strategies directly and also indirectly. I want my students to learn word recognition, vocabulary, and comprehension through reading instruction. I want to reinforce this through lots of free voluntary reading. In his Reading Hypothesis, Krashen (1993) says that free voluntary reading “results in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical development” (p.12). I want my students to learn to express themselves through writing and to be able to use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling when they do so. I instruct them directly in these area and then reinforce this with lots of free

voluntary reading as Krashen (1993) shows helps these specific skills. I also give them ample opportunity to express themselves through writing.

The unit of instruction I have designed for my first grade class is built around the theme of Animals in Literature. We are reading many Caldecott Medal books dealing with animal characters including *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, *Frog and Toad Are Friends*, *Seven Blind Mice*, *The Ugly Duckling*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present*. We are also reading many traditional stories dealing with animals such as the *Three Little Pigs* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. We have a bookcase set up in the classroom filled with other books dealing with animal characters including *Curious George*, *Clifford the Big Red Dog*, *Arthur*, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *Mushroom in the Rain*, *Peter Rabbit*, and *The Cat in the Hat*. We are constantly filling our bookcase with more and more books featuring animals. I have even found some multicultural ones.

I have organized my literacy instruction to include four different instructional approaches: literature focus units, literature circles, reading and writing workshop, and basal reading programs. I don't spend as much time on the basal reading program as I do the other three approaches since I believe the students get more practice learning skills through free voluntary reading than workbooks and worksheets that accompany the basal readers. Worksheets aren't as interesting as the experience of reading.

In my literature focus unit, we read most of the Caldecott Medal books together as a class then we apply what we have learned to many creative projects.

We have literature circles almost every day. I have six different books and I let the students select which book they would like to read. The students then break into book clubs where they read and then I join them for a short discussion. I give them an activity to do involving the book.

The last part of our language arts period is dedicated to reading and writing workshop. I usually have different group centers. Some students will be doing reading workshop whereby they will choose their own book, read it, and do selected activities.

Some students will be doing writing workshop whereby they will choose various writing activities. During this time I meet with students and confer with them about books they are reading and about things they are writing. At the end of reading and writing workshop I try to have a sharing period where students may come up and sit in the author's chair and read things they have written during writing workshop or books they have read during reading workshop. Students may ask questions to the person sharing.

During literature focus unit time, I utilize many of the scaffolding levels for reading experience. If we are reading a book that is too difficult for the students to read by themselves, such as *The Velveteen Rabbit*, I model reading by reading the book aloud to the class to show how good readers should read. I utilize the shared reading level when we read big books of the *Three Little Pigs* and *Little Red Riding Hood* together. I read and the students follow me. We also read the story of *Pierre* by Maurice Sendak which contained the "I don't care" refrain that the students enjoyed repeating. I try to do a lot of interactive reading during literature focus time by allowing the students to take a turn reading. We have read several poems dealing with animals. I had them choral read these poems by taking turns reading different lines. I am also planning to incorporate readers theatre into our classroom when we will read a play featuring animal characters. The students will get a chance to read the roles of characters. I utilize guided reading by breaking the class into small groups where I introduce a book and let the students read it. I then observe them while they read and check their use of strategies. The independent reading level of scaffolding is used in my class during reading workshop and free voluntary reading time. I confer with students at various times to monitor and talk about their reading.

Since writing is a big component to my balanced program, I spend a lot of time scaffolding my students' writing experiences. At the modeled level, I demonstrate what the writing process is like by thinking, creating, and writing text in front of my students. At the shared level, I use the language experience approach by writing down what the students actually say to me. At the interactive level of scaffolding, we do a lot of interactive writing.

I assist the students spell and punctuate but they write the text on chart paper. In this way we “share the pen” to write something that we later read and reread and can use for other activities. At the guided level, I plan structured activities for the students to do which I then supervise. An example of this would be when we made a class alphabet book using verbs in the style of *Alligators All Around* by Maurice Sendak. I also guide the students’ writing by conferring with them and assisting with proofreading and revisions. The independent writing level is seen in my class during writing workshop. Students are allowed to write stories and other compositions. I confer and monitor them. They are allowed to share their writing with the class during sharing period.

The reading and writing processes are central to my balanced program. The reading process consists of five steps: prereading, reading, responding, exploring, and applying. During the prereading stage I introduce a book and talk about the author and genre of the story. I try to activate the students’ prior knowledge about the story by asking questions related to it. Then we read the book. This can be done using any of the five scaffolding approaches. The students then respond to the book by asking questions and expressing their thoughts about it. This can be done through grand conversations. They also may write about the book in their reading logs. During the exploring stage, we examine the technical aspects of the text such as its structure. I teach them about skills and strategies involved in reading. Depending on if we are using our basal readers, we might do some workbook pages dealing with reading skills, phonics, spelling, and grammar. I try to keep this to a minimum since I believe they will get these same things through more free voluntary reading than if I spend a lot of time drilling them with workbook pages. However, I do believe that it is appropriate to point out and teach them about such things so they may be aware of them when they are reading. Finally at the applying stage, I allow the students to apply what they have gathered from the four previous stages to projects in reading and writing that they create or that I assign.

communicative function of reading and writing so I have set up a class post office where students can send and receive mail to each other. We are also exploring the possibility of becoming email pen-pals with a class in another state.

It is important that reading be comprehensible to students. I do include some phonics instruction in my balanced program because knowing some phonics rules can help make texts comprehensible. However, I want to keep it short and fun if possible. I teach phonics through minilessons related to things that are in books we are reading. In my class I try to incorporate some phonics into activities like the language experience approach and interactive writing. I also allow the students to play game activities like word sorts and making words so they learn phonics in a fun way that will enhance their writing and reading abilities. I believe that it is important for my students to understand the four cueing systems in language because they are so prevalent in all of our communication. Again, I want them to learn about them in as painless a way as possible. Learning about them through the literature and game activities seems to be the most productive way for my students.

I am connecting my Animals in Literature unit to other content areas because I believe it is important to connect the reading and writing we are doing in language arts to other areas of the curriculum. We are learning about various animals in science and I am also trying to connect some of the themes we have read about into social studies. We have also done an art project related to our theme. We studied Frida Kahlo's use of animals in painting and the students each painted an animal using examples of her work as a basis.

Assessment is a part of my balanced program. However, my assessment procedures are performance-based and tied directly to reading and writing activities rather than tests. I monitor the students reading progress by listening to them read and by making running records of their errors. I listen to what they say to me during conferences and to what they say during grand conversations. I monitor their writing progress by looking at their drafts and other activities involving writing such as their reading logs. Students put

communicative function of reading and writing so I have set up a class post office where students can send and receive mail to each other. We are also exploring the possibility of becoming email pen-pals with a class in another state.

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their work together into portfolios that I will look over to see how much they have learned at the end of our Animals in Literature unit. I will be able to see their progress in such areas as vocabulary, spelling, and how they articulate themselves using the writing process.

Each day I schedule time for free voluntary reading and for me to read aloud to the class. Krashen (1993) speaks of controlled studies where children who have been read to regularly for several months show superior gains in vocabulary and reading comprehension. I think it is important that I spend time reading aloud to my students every day since it will help their progress. When we have free voluntary reading, I too will sit and read a book for pleasure to model reading for the students. Krashen (1993) has said that reading models are important in a child's life because "children read more when they see other people reading" (p.42). It is important that my students see an adult reading for pleasure since many of them do not see their parents reading at home in these fast-paced times we live in. I believe that free voluntary reading and the other reading my students do also helps their writing ability because they are constantly being exposed to language and style. Like Krashen (1993) says "we acquire writing style, the special language of writing, by reading" (p.72).

I have made my classroom a print-rich environment. I have a library filled with books, magazines, and newspapers and another bookcase filled with animal books we use for our unit theme. In our class library area, I have many comfortable beanbags, couches, and chairs for the students to read in. Around the room are various literature centers where students may work on activities. There is also different writing and reading centers that are used daily. There is a computer center where students may type things they have written and soon be able to write emails to others. There is a post office center which receives and distributes class mail. Around the classroom walls I have made bulletin boards highlighting authors and books and things the students have written. We have several Animals in Literature-theme boards. I also have a large word wall that we are constantly adding to. In the front of the classroom is a comfortable author's chair for reading to the class.

Around the room is evidence of the types of activities we are doing in our balanced program. There are the alphabet books we made featuring verbs. There is a class library where we have bound students' individual books and the class collaborative books we have made together. There is evidence of our interactive writings on the walls around the writing center. There is a bulletin board showing word sorts we did from several of the books we read together in class.

Smith (1988) writes that it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the literacy club exists and that no child is excluded from it. I follow his statement and make sure that my interaction with other students does not exclude anyone. I am consistent with the rules the students and I agreed upon at the beginning of the year. I do not favor any student or reading group more than others. I model reading for my students. I try to help and guide students who are having difficulty making reading choices. If I have students that are having difficulty reading, I will try various ways to scaffold their learning depending on where I see the problem lies. Though I don't have any students who are still learning English, if I did I would contextualize the instruction I gave them with lots of visuals and gestures so that they may also participate in the literacy club of our classroom.

In the literacy club of our classroom the students know that I expect them to interact with each other in a positive way. No one is excluded from activities. We are taught respect for each other. I expect my students to work together in centers. I expect them to help others who may need help. I have incorporated reading buddies into our class whereby more proficient readers will read with the ones having more difficulty. This allows both readers to benefit from each other.

My classroom philosophy is to maintain my literacy club. I believe the best way to do this is by allowing the students lots of time for reading. I must use literature and find ways to gather as much of it as I can in my classroom. I must model reading so that my students see an adult taking pleasure in reading. It is also important that I allow the students lots of opportunity and choice. If they are to become lifelong readers and writers, they must

not have these things forced upon them in an authoritative manner. They need to be able to find and discover a love for reading through their own decisions. In my literacy club I encourage students to become engaged in literature. I encourage my students to take risks. I believe only by taking risks will they move on to discover new areas of literature or break new grounds in their own writing. Finally, my classroom philosophy would include no extrinsic rewards for reading and writing related activities. I agree with Smith (1988) who writes that this can lead to a child believing that reading is not something worth doing in its own right but only to get a reward.

By utilizing a variety of perspectives in implementing a “balanced literacy” approach and by keeping literature at the heart of my program, I believe that I will be able to help my students become better readers and writers. Even more, by keeping my classroom an atmosphere of print, support, choice, and enthusiasm, my students will want to be members of this literacy club forever.

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