Throwing the Baby Out with the Bathwater: What Should Remain from Balanced Literacy

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Abstract

As teachers transition to more science-backed ways of teaching reading, many may be left wondering what should remain from their former practices. This article discusses lessons learned from a teacher working in the field for the last ten years and navigating the changing landscape of literacy teaching, specifically moving from a balanced literacy approach to structured literacy. After discussing tenets, strengths, and criticisms of both approaches, the article lays out three common, research-backed features of balanced literacy teaching worth incorporating into structured literacy teaching.

Keywords: balanced literacy, structured literacy; instructional strategies, Science of Teaching Reading

Introduction

Polarizing discussions around best literacy practices have existed for over a century. Where speech and language are innate, with hard-wired systems in our brains, reading is not (Wolf & Stoodley, 2008). Thus, the teaching of reading must be intentional and responsive. Still, the pendulum swings between whole-language and structured phonics approaches without mediation.

My teacher preparation program focused little on literacy ideologies, instead focusing on exposure to children's literature and offering management tools or cross curricular strategies. Consequently, most of my literacy education happened during my first few years of teaching. I worked for a district implementing The Units of Study out of the Teacher's College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University, a now much debated curriculum using the Balanced Literacy approach (BL) (2022). I received hours and hours of free training and coaching, and much of the approach feels ingrained in my mind set around literacy and learning to read.

My perspective began to shift when I accepted a position as a dyslexia interventionist and started training. My eyes quickly opened to the extreme weaknesses of the program and the approach. Emily Hanford's podcast Sold a Story has gained attraction since its release in 2022, pointing out the disproven cueing model still utilized by many balanced literacy programs, including Units of Study (2006). This has shed new light on the failures of a whole language based on the Science of Teaching Reading (SOTR) backed Structured Literacy approach (SL).

While I have noticed that a phonics-based approach like SL has provided better outcomes for all students in my class, as a former practitioner of balanced literacy, I often question— what habits from my old teaching practice should remain? How does one blend the systematic and sequential approach of structured literacy with the meaning-driven and authentic methods of

balanced literacy? There are benefits to both approaches, and some features of balanced literacy deserve to remain.

Balanced Literacy and Structured Literacy

Balanced literacy is often defined in multi-bullet pointed lists, outlining core ideologies rather than a set of classroom methods, making it challenging to characterize briefly. The programs are designed to be responsive, using various materials and strategies. balanced literacy philosophy also emphasizes the importance of physical space, classroom culture and community, and book representation (Heydon & Iannacci, 2004; Parr & Campbell, 2012). Where balanced literacy can be ambiguous, Structured Literacy is definitive. It is rigid and systematic, emphasizing explicit instruction and direct student-teacher interactions. The SL approach prioritizes phonics instruction, teaching the logical codes of English. It is highly encouraged for students with dyslexia and has been proven to help remediate decoding disabilities (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2019; Spear-Swearling, 2019).

Components of balanced literacy include a balanced literacy end of shared reading, read-aloud, partner reading, independent reading, and guided reading—all typical to a traditional reader's workshop model (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2009; O'Day, 2009; Spear-Swearling, 2019). The International Literacy Association states balanced literacy "mixes features of whole language and basic skills instruction." (ILA Literacy glossary, 2023). SL focuses primarily on "phonological awareness, word recognition, phonics and decoding, spelling, and syntax at the sentence and paragraph levels." (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2019).

In contrast with SL, balanced literacy has shortened explicit instruction, with accentuated time on independent and partner practice (Calkins, 2006; Westerlund & Besser, 2021). Most polarizing is that balanced literacy is meaning-driven with a heavy focus on comprehension, in that teachers guide students towards context clues rather than decoding when participating in word solving (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2009; O'Day, 2009; Spear-Swearling, 2019).

Criticisms

As stated earlier, the definition of balanced literacy is neither consistent nor all that specific. This arbitrary implementation often leads to haphazard rather than sequential teaching (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2019; O'Day, 2009). Teachers are also expected to differentiate during small group time but often do not possess the knowledge to fully individualize or tailor instruction without explicit or diagnostic curricular materials. For example, the Units of Study provide one small group idea per lesson to be taught during a lengthy independent reading block. This lesson typically teaches a comprehension skill using students' independent reading books (Calkins, 2006). These small groups are not sufficient to meet the needs of many readers and do not fill the gaps created by the often shortened explicit, whole group instruction. In fact, there is consensus that balanced literacy is not effective for all readers, specifically for readers with dyslexia or other word-reading difficulties, as well as English Learners (McCardle, Scarborough, & Catt, 2001; Spear-Swearling, 2019; Westerlund & Besser, 2021). The curricular materials do not spend adequate time on decoding skills for these students, who tend to respond best to

explicit and systematic instruction. The problem for dyslexic students is exacerbated by balanced literacy's focus on meaning, using predictable rather than decodable texts encouraging the use compensatory strategies over true word-reading (Spear-Swearling, 2019). Lastly, balanced literacy often utilizes reader's workshop methodologies, with considerable time allocated to independent reading. Studies showing links between volume reading and reading achievement have demonstrated a strictly correlational relationship (NRP, 2000). The use of independent reading during the language arts block may detract from more beneficial or intentional activities and instruction.

Many districts and teachers recognize the misgivings of a strictly balanced literacy approach, opting for a more systematic method instead. Balanced literacy is not adequate for all readers (McCardle, Scarborough, & Catts, 2001), but not all readers need repeated structured literacy practice. When describing this systematic approach, Lorimor-Easley & Reed state, "no assumptions are made about what students can do, no lessons are skipped or considered unimportant" (2019). This all-encompassing approach ensures fewer readers are left behind but also may provide proficient readers with unnecessary instruction by taking a lowest-common-denominator perspective. Additionally, there is concern that a purely phonics-based approach will minimize other critical areas of reading, such as comprehension and necessary vocabulary development for English learners (Ortiz & Lara, 2021).

Beneficial Components

Amid the growing movement against balanced literacy and resurfacing of information contradicting many of balanced literacy's core tenets, educators have found themselves ditching old practices to better serve students. After being in education for nearly a decade, I have felt like I am starting over, leaving everything Lucy Calkins' staff developers ever taught me behind. The fact is, Calkins and other proponents of the cueing model got a lot wrong, but educators do not have to treat this transition like a going-out-of-business sale (Spear-Swearling, 2019). This approach prevailed, and educators like me continued to see student growth for many reasons, despite its errors.

Read Aloud

The read aloud is a vital feature of a typical classroom using balanced literacy strategies, and a body of research supports its implementation (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2009; O'Day, 2009; Parr & Campbell, 2012; Spear-Swearling, 2019). A typical day in my upper elementary balanced literacy classroom began with this component. I read a chapter of engaging grade-level text, exposing students to stories they may not be able to decode independently. Students sat quietly and empty-handed, practicing their auditory comprehension skills and visualizing as I read. Throughout the chapter, I thought aloud, modeling my cognitive process, or invited students to discuss a comprehension question with an academic partner. Later in the day, when teaching a comprehension skill such as symbolism in a small group, the students and I all could practice with a shared, complex text.

The National Reading Panel found that students experiencing read aloud in class learned more vocabulary words through repeated exposures (2000). The read aloud also provides teachers additional opportunities to model comprehension skill work on a grade-level text. Explicit comprehension skill modeling, specifically modeling the teacher's cognitive processes, supports readers in understanding text. Students who receive cognitive strategy instruction are more likely to make gains on measures of reading comprehension (NRP, 2000). This research-backed and engaging feature deserves to remain a key element of a literacy block.

Motivational Considerations

The science of reading heavily supports structured literacy practices, but an Olympic swimming coach cannot teach someone who refuses to get in the water. Reading motivation, including positive self-efficacy and high value of reading and reading tasks, is associated with positive reading outcomes (Wigfield, Gladstone, & Turci, 2016).

Exposure to high-quality literature is a tenet of balanced literacy and is emphasized by most programs (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2019). Teachers are invited to have enormous libraries and rely on strategies like student book choice and volume reading to encourage reading achievement. Where SL approaches tend to rely more strictly on decodable text, balanced literacy uses a wider variety of texts for instruction. Student self-selection of texts increases autonomy, a proven factor in improving students' reading motivation (Wigfield, Gladstone, & Turci, 2016). Decodable texts are limited by the word patterns previously taught, generally making their subjects less interesting or unrepresentative of the students' experiences. For example, if a student is practicing decoding closed syllables, the child will read names like Pam, Tim, or Jeff, which will not mirror their complete experience. This is not a dismissal of decodable readers, simply an admission to what they are lacking. Also, selecting engaging texts at the student's instructional level becomes increasingly important as the child enters adolescence. (Morris, 2014; Wigfield, Gladstone, & Turci, 2016). A comprehensive literacy approach should include both authentic text and decodable readers.

Additionally, according to Ortiz and Lara (2021), SL approaches "do not acknowledge the tremendous within-group differences characteristic of the emergent bilingual population, across such factors as native language and English proficiency, racial/ethnic background, socioeconomic status, (dis)abilities, or the impact of the intersection of these identity markers on student achievement" (p. 154). When the focus is purely on the skill, the child's identity may be neglected in place of adherence to a protocol. Including culturally and linguistically responsive materials shows an acknowledgment of students' identities.

Classroom Talk

A strong relationship exists between students' speaking skills and their reading achievement (Goodwin et al., 2021). Yet, SL often does not consider or include oral language instruction or assessment (Ortiz & Lara, 2021). Where structured literacy programs prioritize direct teacher-student interactions, Balanced Literacy programs place heavier importance on partner and collaborative work through more flexible structures like partner reading, book clubs,

or conversational circles (Lorimor-Easley & Reed, 2019; Spear-Swearling, 2019). These more flexible structures give students frequent opportunities to talk, a proven strategy for all students, but especially for English Learners (O'Day, 2009).

Looking Forward

A strictly balanced literacy approach leaves many students behind, discounting the necessary work of phonics instruction and sequential teaching. However, this does not mean experienced teachers should forgo all they have learned. Instead, the teacher may follow a strict sequential structure of lessons and use a read aloud to reinforce skills and vocabulary. Adherence to a program can coincide with selecting engaging and relevant materials, and intentional, guided practice can be supported by academic partners and opportunities for group work. With new learning, teachers can embrace a structured literacy approach while incorporating research-backed strategies highlighted in many balanced literacy programs.

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