Across Reading Domains

What to look for in a balanced literacy classroom

By Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher

The pedagogy of “balanced” literacy is again on the front burner in elementary education. The term has a fraught history, born of the “reading wars” of the 1990s, which pitted whole-language curricula against phonics. Advocates of whole language promoted a literature-based approach that relied on children reading and writing stories while learning phonics incidentally. Phonics advocates pressed for teaching of the alphabetic code first, with instruction targeting comprehension coming later. The pedagogy of balanced literacy was the result of an uneasy détente that sought to find a middle ground. But has the crucial concept of balance been overlooked? Most teachers espouse a balanced literacy philosophy, but how does it play out in classrooms?

Balanced Indicators
Principals seeking to encourage a balanced literacy approach should look

for indicators of balance across multiple dimensions:

Balance across domains. Balanced literacy learning requires equilibrium among the language-arts domains of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing; students need a rich set of daily experiences involving all of these. Yet too often, the more expressive modes of speaking and writing get short shrift. Are students regularly engaged in learning that requires them to formulate ideas, ask questions, and exercise critical thinking? Observe the types of questions used in class: Are students asked primarily low-level recall and reproduction questions at the expense of higher-order questions? Writing is an outgrowth of critical thinking, and students need regular opportunities to show their thinking on paper. A national sample of third- and fourth-grade teachers reported that only 15 minutes per day was devoted to writing instruction in 2016, according to Reading and Writing.

Ask teachers about daily writing instruction and how often they ask students to write throughout the day.

Balance in skills and knowledge. A second facet of balanced literacy learning is that all students receive instruction in the foundational skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. Reading is not hard-wired into the brain; emergent readers must be taught to break the code of written language. These are crucial skills that can’t be left to chance; a systematic scope and sequence of foundational skills is necessary throughout the elementary grades. Look for daily, grade-appropriate skills instruction across these three dimensions, as well as regular assessment intervals to monitor student progress.

But skills instruction without equally robust attention to knowledge-building won’t deliver breakthrough results. Therefore, balanced literacy learning must entail a focus on meaning-making through vocabulary and comprehension instruction. The Knowledge Matters Campaign reports that older readers
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who stall in their progress are often delayed because of gaps in knowledge, not just skills.

As you observe classrooms, look for evidence of knowledge-building efforts such as informational writing and the infusion of science and social studies into the language arts block. In turn, observe whether vocabulary and comprehension instruction occurs during content learning, as these efforts should happen throughout the day.

**Balance in narrative and informational texts.** N.K. Duke reported in 2000 that first-graders received only 3.6 minutes of informational text experiences per day—far less than they needed to learn about biological, social, and physical realms. Her groundbreaking work led to efforts dedicated to ensuring that reading curricula contain more informational texts.

There remains a dearth of informational read-alouds by teachers, however, compared to narrative ones. Watch for such experiences and note the follow-up activities, especially discussion and writing. Students need to generate informational texts as well as consume them.

**Balance in direct and dialogic teaching.** A final principle is that balanced literacy learning requires varying instructional delivery modes, including direct, dialogic, and independent learning. Direct instruction has a strong influence on student learning, particularly at the surface level when skills and knowledge are new. But in order for students to move to deeper learning, they must have regular opportunities to engage in dialogic learning with the teacher and their peers.

When observing discussions, watch to see whether the teacher shares responsibility for discussion with students, and note cognitively challenging questions. Listen for periods of 30 seconds or longer when students are speaking instead of the teacher. And finally, examine whether the independent work students are doing is equally challenging.

Balanced literacy requires stability across domains, skills and knowledge, texts, and instructional methods. Only then can it create the right equilibrium to engage learners and open a world of literacy possibilities for them.

Nancy Frey is a professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University.

Douglas Fisher is a professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High & Middle College.

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