

CHAPTER 1

Toward a Definition of a Balanced Approach to Reading Instruction

Following years of disagreement and debate about how to teach reading, it appears that a consensus is possible if only phonics advocates and whole language enthusiasts find a common ground. Many have thought that the debate would never end; however, there are signs that the controversy is beginning to abate. For instance, fewer articles with a stance either for or against phonics or whole language are being published in reading journals. According to Gaffney and Anderson (2000), whole language was at its peak between 1986 and 1996 but began waning in 1996. One U.S. national survey found that 63% of elementary teachers believed that phonics should be taught directly, and that 89% believed that skills instruction should be combined with literature and language-rich activities (NICHD, 2000). This kind of teacher support for phonics would have been unheard of only a short time ago.

Since 1990 when Marilyn Jager Adams's *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* appeared, many notable educators have written about and endorsed the efficacy of teaching phonics, reading, writing, and spelling in the classroom (i.e., Marie M. Clay, 1993; Patricia M. Cunningham, 2000; Irene Fountas, 1996; Gay Sue Pinnell, 1998; Regie Routman, 1994; and Dorothy Strickland, 1998). And, it has become apparent that more and more elementary school teachers and reading specialists are giving the concept of balanced reading a chance and are willing to reach agreement in finding a common ground where whole language and phonics can coexist. For example, Vail (1991) shows that structure (skills) and texture (language) can be combined with the principles of good teaching, namely, using authentic literature while teaching phonics systematically and painlessly.

The six research studies discussed in this book also have contributed to our understanding of how a balanced approach to reading

instruction works in a more dynamic and fluid way (see Table 1, pp. ix–x). Susan B. Neuman (2001), former director of the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) and current U.S. Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, writes, “We encourage all teachers to explore the research, open their minds to changes in their instructional practice, and take up the challenge of helping all children become successful readers” (p. iii). This call for teachers and other reading professionals to look to research as a way of finding this balance is an important, positive trend. However, even the term *balanced reading* has become a recent cause for discussion, if not confusion. A number of articles and books describing and defining balanced reading approaches, analyzed by Freppon and Dahl (1998), explain that teachers must realize that balanced instruction is more complex than the term conveys. In fact, effective balanced instruction requires a very comprehensive, integrated approach, demanding that teachers know a great deal about literacy research related to emergent literacy, assessment-based instruction, phonological and phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, phonics and word study, selecting appropriate leveled readers, reader response, writing process, and constructivist learning. In the balanced reading classroom, all of these essentials must be addressed, and the teacher also must meet the demands of a multicultural society that requires him or her to be knowledgeable about teaching English language learners to read.

Balance, therefore, is a complex issue and cannot be resolved with simple solutions such as measuring out equal doses of phonics and whole language, as some have misinterpreted the term to mean. Instead, balanced reading needs to be described exponentially. As Pressley (2000) suggests, instruction aimed at promoting comprehension skills should be “multicomponential” (p. 557). Multicomponential elements should include the development of decoding skills, sight words and rich vocabulary development, specific comprehension skills, and reading within a sociocultural context. Other multicomponential instructional areas necessary for developing balanced reading include extensive authentic reading and writing; use of semantic and syntactic contextual cues; self-monitoring and self-regulation; and practice in reading with fluency, speed, and accuracy.

Freppon and Dahl (1998) address the nagging problem of interpreting balanced reading instruction, using the former extreme models of whole language versus phonics instruction. Some harsh critics of balanced reading instruction, such as Louisa Cook Moats (2000), would have teachers believe that *balance* is used only to advance whole language, wrongly asserting that, “whole language about how reading is learned has been contradicted by scientific investigations” (p. 5). Moats also distorts so-called scientific research findings by reporting, “reading science is clear: young children need instruction in systematic, synthetic phonics in which they are taught sound-symbol correspondences singly, directly, and explicitly.” In fact, the six studies presented here insist that there is no one approach that has been deemed to be the best method; therefore, the “synthetic phonics” approach is not regarded by scientific research to be the best or only method for teaching phonics. Researchers now generally agree that early reading instruction does require a “systematic” approach to phonics, albeit an analogy form of phonics that utilizes onset and rime or spelling patterns and has proven to be an equally effective, systematic phonics approach. For instance, Pressley (2002) cites the use of spelling patterns—a decoding-by-analogy approach to word identification—which is supported by scientifically based research as having produced “roughly comparable gains in decoding” (p. 164). The reading community must be wary of the misinformation and distortion of research findings similar to the statement made by Moats (2000) that only a synthetic approach to teaching phonics is known to be effective. Adams (1990a) not only cites the effective use of an onset and rime or phonogrammatic approach to phonics, but she also recommends its use without reservation. Pressley (2002) cites the National Reading Panel’s conclusions that contradict Moats’s claims:

Even though Chall (1967) had concluded that synthetic phonics (i.e., instruction teaching students explicitly to convert letters into sounds and blend the sounds) is more effective than other forms of systematic phonics instruction, *the Panel* [author’s emphasis] reported no statistically significant advantage for synthetic phonics instruction over other phonics approaches. (p. 335)

Unfortunately, as Pressley (2002) discovered when he read more than 20 recent books about balanced reading instruction, few books are

really about balance at all; instead, most are written with a specific bias: to state why reading should be more skills based or more whole language based. I fear that some influential literacy experts will continue to waste their energy, as well as confuse their readers, by delimiting the meaning of the term *balance* instead of researching how to best employ a truly balanced reading program that teaches all children how to read. Dixie Lee Spiegel (1998) takes a humorous, ironic view of the all-or-nothing approach espoused by Moats and her counterparts who reject a phonics–skills approach to reading. Spiegel believes that a truly balanced approach can work because it is not restricted to a misguided search for the “silver bullet” (p. 114), which has failed in the past and will surely fail again if not checked. She provides three characteristics of a balanced approach to reading instruction that should form the foundation on which all beginning reading programs are developed. The approach

- is built on research,
- views teachers as informed decision makers and therefore is flexible, and
- is built on a comprehensive view of literacy. (p. 117)

According to Spiegel, this “comprehensive view of literacy is inclusive, not exclusive” (p. 118) and consists of at least six major components:

1. Literacy involves both reading and writing.
2. Reading is not just word identification, but word identification is part of reading.
3. Readers must be able to take different stances in reading: aesthetic and efferent.
4. Writers must be able to express meaningful ideas clearly.
5. Writing is not just grammar, spelling, and punctuation, but those are all part of effective writing.
6. A comprehensive program develops life-long readers and writers. (p. 117)

In a *New York Times* article, Richard Rothstein (2001) reports that G. Reid Lyon, chief reading researcher at the National Institutes of

Health (NIH), stated that the term *balance* “is only an excuse to ignore phonics research” (p. B7), therefore, calling instead for a “comprehensive approach” to reading. Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) similarly state that they prefer the term *integration* to *balance* because an integrated approach more clearly defines the seamless requirements of a comprehensive, coherent approach to beginning reading instruction. Instead, we might equate the term *balance* with the term *moderation*, used by the ancient Greeks to describe their philosophy of living. It seems that this view is echoed by Dorothy Strickland (1998) in her statement, “Avoiding instructional extremes is at the heart of providing a balanced program of reading instruction” (p. 52). To avoid future debates about which approach to literacy to use, we must not advocate either-or ultimatums. We must avoid instructional extremes, or we will not be able to move forward in implementing literacy instruction that integrates skills in a balanced, comprehensive, thoughtful, and caring way. Another recently debated question is How much should teachers teach directly and explicitly? Alexander and Jetton (2000) state that the answer to this question lies between the extremes and depends on the reader’s level of comfort relative to the content or the strategies undertaken.

Educators would be better served by providing a balanced approach to reading instruction that is more reflective of New Zealand’s literacy instruction, which combines several approaches and materials, as well as procedures, to create “more balanced programmes” (Holdaway, 1979, p. 142) in their schools. Holdaway (1979) presents five elements of a balanced program that have existed in New Zealand for more than two decades:

1. Using Guided Reading: Using the basic series (individualized leveled texts), monitoring progress (i.e., Clay’s running records), and decoding and reading for meaning.
2. Using Language Experience Procedures: Linking language and experience to spoken and written language.
3. Using Individualized Reading Procedures: Conferencing of teacher and child for reading, skill development, and self-selecting books.

4. Using Shared-Book Experience: Using Big Books in group experience procedures.
5. Using Developmental Activities: Using children's literature, story, verse, song, and chants.

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) outline many of these same elements, including components such as reading aloud, shared reading, independent reading, modeled and shared writing, interactive writing, and independent writing. According to Debra Johnson (1999), teachers identify within the guided-reading, small-group session, and they teach specific assessed-skill areas including phonemic awareness, phonics, concepts of print, comprehension, and other interventions that are based on developmental stages and related benchmarks within the balanced reading curriculum. In this way, beginning reading is taught in a balanced, integrated manner; phonics and meaning are taught seamlessly and as needed, not because of a preconceived notion and not because one ideology is promoted over another.

McIntyre and Pressley (as cited in Freppon & Dahl, 1998), in concert with Vygotsky (1934/1978) and Clay (1991), recommend the following key practices that lead to balanced instruction based on children's cultural and background information, as well as their interests, strengths, and needs:

- using an assessment-to-instruction model of teaching;
- respecting children's backgrounds, language, interests, and abilities;
- using information about the learners' culture, values, knowledge, and interests to plan instruction;
- teaching strategies and skills explicitly using a whole-part-whole approach that returns the learner to meaningful whole text; and
- providing planned, systematic instruction on needed strategies (McIntyre & Pressley, as cited in Freppon & Dahl, 1998).

Through observation of children, and assessment-based teaching, teachers develop a clearer understanding of their children's reading ability, informing themselves about what, how, and when to intervene. For instance, knowledge of Clay's (cited in Adams, 1998) three cueing systems—semantics (meaning), structure (syntax), and

graphophonics (visual)—helps teachers know which cues and patterns children are employing as they read. Teaching phonemic awareness and phonics to children whose assessed needs indicate that this type of instruction is required is important for their future reading success. Also, based on children’s assessed needs, teachers who take running records are empowered to see what children need and are more likely to teach the code, sometimes employing skills in a contextual reading approach and sometimes in the form of direct instruction. The more empowered teachers are, the more knowledgeable they become about research and instructional alternatives and the more likely they are to use a balanced approach to reading instruction.

Despite an apparent move toward reconciliation among disparate factions of reading professionals by endorsing balance in their reading programs, other reading professionals fear that the term *balanced reading instruction*, as yet, has not been defined clearly. As a result, school districts may begin buying “balanced reading kits” and end up in just as bad a situation as they were in the past. In a session on balanced reading at the 1999 International Reading Association Annual Convention in San Diego, Jerome Harste admonished more than a thousand teachers, saying, “We need knowledgeable professionals in the classroom. Instead, we are back in the business of buying programs [rather than] teaching kids how to read.... Teacher-proof materials just don’t work!” A number of such foreboding predictions have been echoed by Freppon and Dahl (1998); Pearson (1999); Reutzel (1999); Spiegel (1998); and Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, Rankin, Mistsretta, Yokoi, and Ettenberger (1997).

D. Ray Reutzel (1999) states that balanced reading “is defined anew without attention to ‘our reading past’” (p. 322). He also is concerned that the perception many have is that phonics is equal to whole language, and, therefore, instruction should be a 50-50 proposition; but that is not what is needed. This author has similar concerns having been witness to too many pendulums swinging from one side of the skills ledger to the other. Consequently, it is recommended that this is the moment to be cautious and to reconsider, to review the research closely, and to make decisions judiciously. In a study I conducted on balanced reading (Cowen, 2001), a group of 20 prekindergarten

through third-grade teachers who had been immersed in the literature and in some recent studies related to balanced reading began grappling with the question What should be the essential elements of a balanced reading program? Cassidy and Wenrich (1998) exhort that we must not forget our reading past and that a successful program must be a combination or blend of whole language and phonics instruction. In response, my inquiry with the teachers culminated in 15 essential elements for developing a truly balanced reading program. Of course, this list should not be viewed as complete nor is it intended as a model to be adopted. Instead, the following elements are presented only as a representative list forged from a strong philosophical belief system that enabled one particular group of teachers to develop their own thoughtful, integrated, comprehensive approach to balanced reading (Cowan, in press):

We believe that a balanced reading program should provide

1. authentic, real literature, including nursery rhymes, fairy tales, and poems that provide students with opportunities to read and enjoy a variety of genres (fiction, nonfiction, and themes), including a rich assortment of multicultural resources;
2. a very comprehensive writing-process program that engages students in daily writing, peer editing, and publishing activities;
3. an integrated language arts and phonics skills-development approach that requires skills to be taught from the context of real literature as well as from student writing;
4. attention to the three cueing systems—semantics, syntactics, and graphophonics—to give students the required blend of skills, enabling them to read texts meaningfully and with understanding;
5. metacognitive, self-monitoring, fix-up, and scaffolding strategies to support student word recognition and reading comprehension;
6. opportunities to develop learning strategies to use in new situations and to acquire new information to develop higher order thinking skills;

7. ongoing assessment for continuous progress that engages students at the independent or instructional reading level and avoids reading materials at their frustration reading level;
8. oral storytelling, dictation, and other listening activities, including phonological and phonemic awareness development at the primary level;
9. an interdisciplinary content area reading approach, stressing the use of a wide variety of trade books as well as textbooks;
10. shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and one-on-one instruction, particularly for struggling readers;
11. time commitment to on-task reading, writing, and related language arts activities;
12. reading/learning centers for exploration and discovery in all areas of the language arts and for managing individual and differentiated instruction;
13. opportunities for developing and maintaining a language rich environment;
14. a supportive, nurturing classroom that meets the diverse needs of students and that also promotes listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing as joyful experiences; and
15. promotion of ongoing family involvement in children's literacy development.

This list is indicative of a professional group of elementary teachers who are open to change and willing to incorporate a comprehensive and integrated approach to literacy for the benefit of all children. It is evident that this approach is comprehensive and integrated and could be woven into most teachers' definition of balance. Within these 15 elements are phonemic awareness, phonics, reading literature for understanding, and writing as a process to engage children in joyful expression and communication. It is also apparent that this group of teachers put aside differences to find a common ground, and that their choice of essential elements will help them to address the various strengths and needs of their students to help them become better readers, better writers, and better communicators.

A Balanced Approach to Beginning Reading Instruction should provide easier access to the research for teachers and other individuals who are interested in refining their own definition of balanced reading. I recently have been empowered to write a personal definition of balanced reading based on more than 20 years of experience as a classroom teacher and more than 30 years of researching balanced approaches to reading instruction. As a result of these experiences and in the spirit of coming to a truly balanced, unbiased, ideological approach to teaching children how to read, the following definition is offered:

A balanced reading approach is research-based, assessment-based, comprehensive, integrated, and dynamic, in that it empowers teachers and specialists to respond to the individual assessed literacy needs of children as they relate to their appropriate instructional and developmental levels of decoding, vocabulary, reading comprehension, motivation, and sociocultural acquisition, with the purpose of learning to read for meaning, understanding, and joy.

Teachers continue to grow and to learn by engaging in the tension of theory and practice as it is revealed to us more clearly through research; consequently, we are inspired and committed to teach, using everything that is necessary to help children learn to read successfully. In the final analysis, it is my belief that a balanced approach to beginning reading instruction, supported by the six major U.S. research studies, can help us to put the “reading wars” to rest.