ED435986 1999-11-00 Balanced Reading Instruction. ERIC Digest D144.

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ERIC Identifier: ED435986
Publication Date: 1999-11-00
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Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading English and Communication Bloomington IN.

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Over the years more and more educators have started to agree that no single approach to teaching reading is fundamentally superior to all the rest. As early as 1967 the First-Grade Studies project, conducted specifically to examine the best approach to reading, concluded that children learn to read by a variety of materials and methods and

that a combination of approaches is often more effective. Moreover, teacher and learning situation characteristics may be more important than the method employed. (Bond and Dykstra, 1967, 1997).

The balanced reading approach has been celebrated for offering an alternative to the extremes of pure phonics or whole language; for providing an effective combination of instructional approaches; and for accommodating various learning styles. (Pressley, 1998; Weaver, 1998; Kelly, 1997; Atterman, 1997)

The purpose of this digest is to review various interpretations of balanced instruction and to explore the relationship between this instructional approach to beginning reading and state reading standards.

WHAT IS BALANCED READING?

Balanced reading instruction usually means a combination of whole language and phonics approaches. Researchers and practitioners alike assert that children need training in both phonemic awareness--by which they develop an awareness of individual sounds--and in cueing strategies--through which they learn to decode the text and comprehend the material (Kelly, 1997). Carbo (1996) points out that students have different learning styles. The "analytic and auditory students," in particular, benefit from phonics instruction; students with "visual, tactile and global learning styles" tend to profit from a whole language approach. Further, the different stages of reading acquisition (selective cue, spelling-sound, and automatic) require different approaches. It is during the spelling-sound stage that phonics instruction is especially crucial. (Raven, 1997) According to the California Department of Education (1995, 1996) "the heart of a powerful reading program is the relationship between explicit, systematic skills instruction and literature, language and comprehension. While skills alone are insufficient to develop good readers, no reader can become proficient without these foundational skills." Honig (1996) similarly defines a balanced approach as "one which combines the language and literature-rich activities associated with whole language with explicit teaching of the skills needed to decode words-for all children."

Another viewpoint argues for focusing not merely on reading but on literacy. Broadly defined, this means integrating language and literacy across modes of language and across disciplines and attending to skills and strategies in context - that is, in the context of reading, writing, and learning from the whole and meaningful texts (texts that children themselves find meaningful) (Weaver, 1998)

For Pressley and McIntyre (quoted in Freppon & Dahl, 1998) the theoretical base for balanced instruction is cultural and psycholinguistic. "It is a useful term for what good teaching is: thoughtful planned instruction based on childrens' backgrounds, interests, strengths and needs."

The challenge, then, is to identify where to situate phonics in a balanced reading program--whether to separate it and teach it explicitly or to teach it within the context of an integrated language-based program.

EXAMPLES FROM CLASSROOM PRACTICE

As the above authors note, the exploration of balanced reading at this stage has produced more practical versions than research-based reports. Hence, the meaning of balanced at this point is best illustrated through examples of teaching.
Cunningham and Hall (1998) describe a balanced framework for literacy where instruction is divided equally between the four major historical approaches to reading instruction. The time allotted to Language Arts is divided among four blocks: Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writers Workshop, and Working with Words, each receiving 30-40 minutes.

Another method providing a balanced conceptual framework for skills instruction is called "whole-part-whole," i.e. the starting point is the literary text providing the background for skills instruction before going back once again to discussions of meaningful texts (Strickland, 1998; Fowler, 1998). Strickland maintains that skills and meaning should never be separated and that intensive skills instruction should be based on identified need. In addition teachers need to be fully aware of instructional objectives for the grade they are teaching, a grade below and a grade above.

Carbo (1996) discusses ways to balance phonics programs through literature and fun and whole language programs through sufficient decoding and direct instruction. Lapp and Flood (1997) support the view that phonics should be taught both explicitly and contextually, a balance sought to integrate what children already know with new learning of skills and content.

READING INSTRUCTION AND LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS

Following the failure of adopting national standards for the language arts, each State Department of Education started to develop its own statewide standards. A number of documents of the following organizations were considered in this effort - Assessment and Exercise Specifications; NAEP Reading Consensus Project; 1992 Reading Consensus; Standards for the English Language Arts, 1996, NCTE and IRA; The Edison Project, 1994; The New Standards Project, 1997; International Baccalaureate Program, 1992, 1995; and Speech Communication Association, 1996. (Kendall & Marzano, 1997)
Three major assessments of state standards have been completed recently: those of the Fordham Foundation (1997), the American Federation of Teachers (1997), and of the Council for Basic Education (1998). Each focuses on the quality of state Language

Arts (LA) standards, assessing such criteria as soundness, rigor, and clarity and specificity. Each organization develops its own criteria for judging the standards. The assumption behind the studies is that standards set common expectations and contribute to equity. Stotsky (1997) points out that they help establish coherent educational practices and guidelines for professional preparation, while Joftus (1998) notes their importance as a basis for accountability and measurement of student achievement.

The major findings of the three studies converge on the points related to the vagueness of reading requirements, lack of literary specifics and emphasis on skills and processes over content knowledge. Stotsky also finds a major problem with the omission of vocabulary development as a reading skill. They also make it clear that the quality of LA standards range widely from state to state with Iowa not having any written documentation on LA standards. In addition, some states openly promote particular pedagogical approaches, for example, phonics or whole language in reading instruction.

CONCLUSION

Balanced reading instruction has been highly debated in the literature. The approaches to teaching beginning reading touch upon issues of political rationale and lifelong opportunities, academic versus utilitarian curriculum (Marlow, 1998), as well as quantifiable data versus case studies and ethnographic research. Education as an intrinsically inert system needs time to yield results. That no approach produces quick fixes can be traced through the long history of contending methods to teaching reading. Curriculum alignment needs to link instructional content to clearly defined, research-based standards, and to leave creative space for teachers to search and find the balance in their own classrooms.

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Digest #144 is EDO-CS-99-05 and was published in November 1999 by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E 10th Street, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698, Telephone (812) 855-5847 or (800) 759-4723. ERIC

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0028. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

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Title: Balanced Reading Instruction. ERIC Digest D144.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Available From: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th Street, Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698; Web site: http://www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec.
Descriptors: Academic Standards, Beginning Reading, Phonics, Primary Education, Reading Instruction, State Standards, Whole Language Approach
Identifiers: Balanced Reading Instruction, ERIC Digests
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