Seeking Equilibrium: In What Ways Are Teachers Implementing a Balanced Literacy Approach Amidst the Push for Accountability?

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Abstract

This article examines how elementary public school teachers in South Texas are implementing a balanced literacy approach in light of the expectations of accountability for student performance. For more than three decades, Texas schools have felt, and continue to feel, the pressure of accountability. Therefore, it becomes essential to investigate the ways in which teachers have responded to this expectation while implementing a balanced literacy approach in English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) classes. This research study reveals the results of more than 500 teacher responses to a survey concerning the implementation of this approach and the instructional practices that the teachers use to address accountability. The findings show that most teachers did read-aloud and independent reading components every day, and that shared and interactive writing components were implemented the least. On a related note, teachers expressed the need for more training in writing instruction. This paper also examines the test-taking instructional practices implemented in the classroom.

"I am not seeing quality teaching like y'all taught us in our reading methods courses," …[but instead], my cooperating teacher only does practice test passages and test-taking skills during the English Language Arts/Reading (ELAR) allotted time," exclaimed a disenchanted student teacher during a college class. She knew that sacrificing quality instruction to prepare for standardized tests is a warning cited by Green and Melton (2007). Another student teacher commented that her cooperating teacher had not taught a single writing lesson during the first month of her clinical teaching. Rather, the cooperating teacher simply, "did not have time to teach writing" due to the administration's pressure to "pass the reading test." Still another student teacher stated that her cooperating teacher "got rid of all the classroom picture books and replaced them with practice test passages." This is a concern of Shanahan, (2014) who asserts that many teachers are having students take more practice tests while engaging in less creative writing projects due to pressures of data-driven schools. Finally, one student teacher said her cooperating teacher often interrupted her teaching to review practice test passages and/or cut her (the student teacher's) teaching time short to fit in test-taking practice drills at the end of each lesson.

This particular class was unusual in some ways, but familiar in other ways. These student teachers' frustrations were being voiced all too often—that was the familiar thing about this class. However, the class became unusual in the discussion that ensued as a result of the student teachers' internal conflicts between what they knew quality teaching included and what they were actually witnessing in the very classrooms in which they were student teaching. They had been taught in their Reading Methods courses that according to Tompkins (2017), students learn best through authentic and relevant lessons which included both teacher-centered and student-centered activities with a balanced pedagogical approach to reading and writing. Yet that was not what they were seeing in their school placements.

A Balanced Literacy Approach

A balanced literacy approach (BLA) has been described in a multitude of ways. However, for this paper, we use the following definition: a balanced literacy approach is a *way* of teaching or pedagogy that includes a "philosophical orientation which assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support through multiple environments in which teachers use various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and student control" (Frey, Lee, Tollfeson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005, p.272). It is where literacy is taught using a balance of teacher- and student-initiated activities (Spegiel, 1994), as well as equal attention to phonics skills and whole-language approaches (Goodman, 1992). Finally, a balanced literacy approach is described as using explicit instruction while engaging students in authentic learning experiences, making sure to incorporate equally both reading and writing activities (Tompkins, 2017).

The components that comprise a balanced literacy approach also vary. For this research study, we include the read-aloud, shared reading, independent reading, modeled writing, shared writing, and independent writing (Mermelstein, 2006). In the read-aloud and modeled writing, the teacher is driving the instruction. In shared reading and writing, both the teacher and students take turns in doing the reading and writing activities. In independent reading and writing, the students read and write on their own while the teacher monitors student activity. Recognizing that other literacy researchers consider the readers' and writers' workshops as vehicles for implementing a balanced literacy philosophy (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1997) and that many teachers automatically think of these workshops when asked about implementing a balanced literacy approach, we add these two terms to the components that comprise a BLA, albeit under a different category. In these daily workshops, the following literacy activities happen: a mini-lesson, guided and independent practice, and closure. The brief mini-lesson mirrors the teacher-directed balanced literacy components mentioned above: the read-aloud and modeled writing. During guided reading or writing, the teacher meets with small groups of students to work on certain skills, while the rest of the class work on independent reading/writing. Finally, the teacher provides closure to the lesson by recapping the day's lesson focus and encouraging students to share their accomplishments for the day.

Standardized Testing in Texas

Since 1980, Texas public schools have been required by law to test students in certain grades on basic academic skills. Starting with the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS), this compendium

of tests has evolved into what is presently called the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) (https://tea.texas.gov/student.assessment/staar/). These annual tests measure students' academic achievements against the state standards, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) (https://tea.texas.gov/curriculum/teks/).

Review of Literature

Ample research has been conducted on the effects of state-mandated tests on classroom instruction. This section presents previous research on the impact of such tests on classroom instruction in general, and literacy instruction specifically. First, research has shown that the testing has resulted in the narrowing of the curriculum for those teachers who have made it a practice to limit their lessons to just those standards that are assessed in these tests (IRA, 1999). Hoffman et al. (2001) conducted a survey on the impact of an earlier version of the Texas state-mandated test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), on classroom instruction. They found that respondents planned the year's curriculum around the standards that were going to be assessed on the TAAS.

Second, these state-mandated tests have resulted in teachers spending too much time on test "prep," resulting in their not having adequate time to do 'actual' teaching. In the study above, Hoffman et al. (2001) also found that nearly all of the survey respondents indicated concentrating on test preparation at least a month before testing. Test preparation was required by principals, and it occurred an average of eight to 10 hours a week. Aside from using instructional time for this school-wide initiative, time was also spent administering benchmark tests. This was a finding of Davis and Willson (2015) in their study of the "test-centric" literacy instructional practices that 12 literacy professionals used during the transition from the penultimate Texas state-mandated test, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), to the current statewide assessment, the STAAR. Participants described an elaborate system of tests that mirrored the past STAAR tests and were administered at regular intervals, such as every six weeks or every two months. Teachers were required to mimic official STAAR-testing conditions when administering these "mock" tests, which meant at least a day's loss of instruction every testing period. Kontovourki (2012) coined the term "assessment-saturated" to describe the aforementioned classrooms where frequent benchmark testing occurred.

Another impact of state-mandated tests has been the commonplace use of test-formatted passages in classroom instruction. Instead of using authentic reading materials, such as notable children's literature or authentic models of writing, teachers were expected to use reading passages or writing prompts that were modeled after the items in the released state tests. Anagnostopolous (2005) found that participant English teachers, during discussions of novels, tended to ask questions that were patterned after the ones that were on previous state tests. In addition to the use of test-formatted passages, these teachers were using explicit instruction and highly regimented procedures for reading these passages. One participant in Davis and Willson's (2015) study talked about the acronym TOPCAT, which was a prescribed formulaic approach that all teachers at the school were required to use when reading and teaching poetry. Students were required to write the letters of the acronym, which stood for "title, organization, paraphrase, clues, attitude, and theme," vertically on the margin of the text and to use it as a guide when reading poems.

A fourth effect of state-mandated tests was the systematization of a "complex data economy" (Davis & Willson 2015, p. 365). The participants in the study above stated how they had periodic meetings with school administrators and curriculum specialists to disaggregate the data gathered from the benchmark tests and to plan for intervention. Additionally, in each of the districts, schools across the districts were compared based on student performance on district benchmarks.

A fifth effect of state-mandated tests, and an offshoot of all the benchmark testing, was the implementation of interventions. In a case study of how one school responded to the Texas accountability system, Booher-Jennings (2005) found that teachers and administrators participated in an "educational triage" (p. 240), where students were put into three groups based on their performance on the benchmark tests: the safe group (students who are not in danger of failing the state exam), the group of "bubble" students (students on the threshold of passing the exam), and the hopeless group (students who had little chance of passing the exam). School resources were then allocated to the group "bubble" students, thus showing the school's buy-in into what she refers to as a "rationalized myth of data-driven instruction (p. 238)."

Not every effect of state-mandated tests was a negative one. In 2007, Au conducted a synthesis of qualitative studies examining the impact of high-stakes testing on curricular and instructional practices and found that both positive and negative effects existed ,and these effects were connected to the tests themselves. Among the positive effects found were an increase in student-centered pedagogy, content integration, and content expansion (Wolf & Wolf 2002; Wollman-Bonilla, 2004). It is noteworthy that these positive effects were found only in a small number of studies that were analyzed by Au (2007), and most of them occurred in a social studies class. The theory behind these occurrences is that the teachers in these classes intentionally integrated instruction involving higher-order thinking skills, such as analyzing the causes and effects of a certain historical event rather than merely memorizing dates.

Positive effects notwithstanding, we, the authors and researchers, were interested in finding out how teachers were teaching literacy while addressing the demands of state accountability. As current literacy instructors in universities, we were curious to see how teachers were implementing the instructional strategies they had learned in educator preparation programs. As former elementary school teachers, we were particularly interested in examining how teachers were implementing a balanced literacy approach in light of the annual accountability requirements. Our guiding and overarching question was, "in what ways are elementary public school teachers in South Texas implementing a balanced literacy approach while also assisting their students to be successful on the state-mandated assessments?"

Methodology

We created a survey comprised of ten questions; six of them were Likert-scale questions and four were open-ended questions (see Appendix A). The Likert-scale questions included the frequency of and the time spent each day for the implementation of each of the components of a balanced literacy in their classrooms. Additionally, the survey asked the teachers to rate the adequacy of the professional development and the quantity and quality of the instructional materials that the school

administration afforded them. The open-ended questions addressed which component of a balanced literacy approach they regarded as the most difficult to implement and what they had done to address state accountability.

Using available school district directories, the survey was emailed to 5,243 elementary-school (kindergarten through fifth grade) teachers employed in public school districts across a large metropolitan city in South Texas. We then performed statistical analysis on the Likert-scale questions and categorized the open-ended responses by topics and analyzed them for emerging themes using the constant-comparison process (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Creswell, 2009). We first implemented the qualitative process separately and then met to compare the themes that we found from our individual analyses. We then discussed and came to a consensus as to the major themes found in the open-ended responses. This paper is limited to the responses to only one open-ended question, question 10: "What is one thing that you have done to address state and district accountability expectations while implementing a balanced literacy approach?"

FINDINGS

There was a total of 503 respondents to the survey. The respondents included elementary teachers evenly distributed across all grade levels from kindergarten to fifth grade according to the self-reported surveys. These teachers possessed, on average, 11 years of teaching experience. The majority of the respondents (84.60%) stated that they had experience implementing a balanced literacy approach, with 65.2% specifying that they had been implementing this approach from one to 10 years. Only 7.49% stated they had been implementing the approach for more than 20 years.

TEACHER RESPONSES TO THE LIKERT-SCALE QUESTIONS

When asked about their confidence in implementing the different components of a balanced approach, teachers ranked all the reading components higher than the writing ones. The majority of the teachers indicated that they were most confident in implementing read-alouds (88%) and independent reading (81%), but only a small number of teachers (35%) indicated confidence in undertaking interactive writing. They also indicated the importance of using these components on a regular basis. Teachers reported doing independent reading on a daily basis and additionally said that they implemented read-alouds, shared reading, and reading workshops three or four times a week. The survey responses also reflected the teachers' self- reporting that they felt the need for professional development focusing on teaching writing and writing components, such as shared and interactive writing.

Regarding teachers' responses to instructional support that was afforded by the school administration in implementing a balanced literacy approach in their classrooms, teachers deemed it adequate. Additionally, a majority of the teachers indicated that they had adequate (77%) and quality (79%) instructional materials. However, in the open-ended section of the survey, there were some responses that expressed that it was often challenging for some teachers to acquire the appropriate materials for their students. In addition, some teachers stated they had problems

getting resources for bilingual students and others found it challenging to "step away from a specified resource" (i.e., a textbook) and to utilize mentor texts in their instruction.

When it came to the greatest challenge in implementing a balanced literacy approach, an overwhelming 74% of the respondents answered a "lack of time." Most of the teacher respondents reported that finding time in their day to implement all of the components of a balanced literacy approach was the most difficult thing to achieve. Teachers stated this in a variety of ways, including lacking time management skills, not having enough time to plan, or having difficulty in finding time to meet with all students every day.

Teacher Responses to the Open-Ended Question

The following section presents the teacher responses to the open-ended question regarding the one thing that they had done to address state accountability expectations. Our analysis of the responses yielded two broad categories: those practices where the respondents referred to a BLA framework and those practices where the respondents did not. Additionally, the second category is further subdivided into two subcategories: those practices that have been traditionally used in classrooms and those "test-centric" practices (Davis & Willson, 2015) which seem to be a result of the accountability era.

The Teacher Practices Where the Respondents Referred to a BLA Framework

The teacher respondents wrote about a variety of ways that they were implementing the different components of a balanced literacy approach while addressing accountability. One primary instructional strategy that teachers were intentionally including while implementing BLA and addressing accountability was the implementation of higher-order thinking. Another instructional strategy teacher respondents included most often was the use of question stems.

Implementing higher-order thinking. One instructional strategy that was reported was the systematic and intentional incorporation of comprehension strategies that developed higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) in the daily class schedule. One teacher stated, "In order to address the state accountability, we incorporate higher-order thinking strategies that adhere with the comprehension rigor expected in STAAR. These higher thinking strategies are modeled and practiced during group discussion through Read Aloud, Shared Reading, Shared Writing, and Guided Reading activities." Teachers spoke about modeling, as one respondent stated, "[I show students] ...reading/writing strategies to help the students be successful in the STAAR."

Utilizing question stems. A common theme that ran through many responses was the use of question stems during BLA components such as read-alouds and shared reading. These stems are question starters that are meant to provide scaffolding for student learning and cover all levels of Bloom's taxonomy. These quotes are typical of the survey responses that talked about this instructional practice: "We ask STAAR-stem questions during read-alouds" and "We use question stems during shared reading."

Implementing BLA with fidelity. The rest of the responses that mentioned BLA discussed their efforts to implement the different BLA components with fidelity: “I do Guided Reading on a daily basis” and “I have implemented as much of balanced literacy as I can.” This echoes a sentiment stated by several responses that “if implemented correctly, a balanced literacy program will address state accountability expectations.” The two instructional practices that were identified in the responses in terms of implementing BLA with fidelity were the use of authentic literacy activities and doing explicit instruction on reading strategies. Several of the teachers wrote about incorporating reading for real-life connections and writing for real-world applications in classroom instruction. For example, one teacher stated, “I provide students with authentic opportunities to engage with and learn from real texts as well as provide opportunities to write for meaningful purposes.” Additionally, many respondents mentioned doing explicit instruction on reading strategies. “I teach reading strategies (before, during and after).” They also said they used the Five Pillars of Reading (National Reading Panel, 2000) as a framework for instruction. Teachers talked about teaching students to “use context clues to determine the meaning of an unknown word” or “make text-to-text, text-to-life-, and text-to-world connections.” Finally, with regard to the implementation of skills instruction itself, some teachers stated that they do a “daily practice of academic vocabulary” and a “daily language recursive review.”

THE TEACHER PRACTICES WHERE THE RESPONDENTS DID NOT REFER TO A BLA FRAMEWORK.

In addition to specifically mentioning the utilization of a BLA to address accountability, teachers also reported what they did to address the expectations of state accountability in general. These responses did not indicate the context in which they practiced these instructional strategies, whether it was during ELAR or other subjects. Therefore, we decided to devote a section on these responses. Our analyses resulted in the identification of two overarching themes: the continued implementation of research-based instructional practices and the entrenched implementation of “test-centric” practices (Davis & Willson, 2015, p. 357).

Employing traditional classroom practices. Forty-one percent of the responses were categorized as those instructional practices that teachers did, in general, and that research has shown to be effective in increasing student achievement. The instructional practices teachers mentioned were using standards in planning lessons, learner-centered instruction, empowering students, and implementing literacy instruction across the disciplines. This section will discuss these practices.

Using standards in planning lessons. An instructional practice mentioned by 4% of the respondents was the use of state standards to guide their lesson planning. Many of the respondents reported “using the supporting and readiness TEKS”—the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, which are the state standards—to drive their instruction. Many of the teachers, including those from the lower grades (the ones that do not have to take the state assessment, the STAAR, indicated that they followed the TEKS when planning their lessons. Most of these responses referred to their grade level as the foundation for the upper grades: “We unpack the TEKS for first grade and follow (the) strands to second” and “Being a first-grade teacher, we make sure that our curriculum is aligned with 3rd-5th, to create a solid foundation for our students’ learning.” Congruent with this

deconstruction of the TEKS, there were responses that mentioned the intentional inclusion of the "KUDs," the learning targets that clearly state what students are supposed to know, understand, and be able to do after the lesson (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Finally, several respondents mentioned planning lessons in "PLCs," which stands for "Professional Learning Communities" (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016). According to DuFour (2004), this term has been used ubiquitously to mean any group of educators—a grade-level team, a high school department, a committee, etc.—who meet to address any issue in education. There were respondents who mentioned PLCs this way: "We do 'PLCs' with my team to break down the TEKS and to know exactly what to address." There were others, though, who merely stated that they did "PLC-planning." We question whether the idea of PLCs is the same among all the respondents.

Doing learner-centered instruction. Many teachers mentioned doing data-driven, differentiated instruction, which can be defined as providing, "specific ways for students to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's" (Tomlinson, 2001, p.2). Several responses were similar to these quotes, including one teacher who said, "A close examination of data helps pinpoint my students' strengths and weaknesses." While another teacher respondent stated that he/she, "monitors... students' progress throughout the grading period and tailors lessons to their needs." Still another teacher responded, "I provide small-group instruction and one-on-one instruction for the students who need it."

Some teachers were specific with their use of formative assessment results and used them in their instruction. One respondent did "constant monitoring of individual reading and writing progress with running records and writing samples." Others were specific with how they have addressed student needs, starting with their current skill level. One teacher said, "[f]or example, during writer's workshop, the student may be a pre-emergent writer, so I expect him to draw a picture and dictate his story to me. However, I will work with him in learning how to build words using manipulatives such as letter blocks." The analysis of assessment data resulted in teacher-driven or school-wide interventions. One respondent stated that his/her school had an "intervention Block to work with students who are struggling with concepts being taught and/or literacy skills in general." Another respondent wrote, "My campus has a set-aside intervention time that is used to make sure that all students are getting what they need based on data." Many of them explicitly stated doing interventions as part of the school's schedule. Responses also indicated that, in addition to classroom teachers, other campus personnel were also expected to participate in these school-wide interventions. One teacher specified, "Interventions through other campus personnel when I see a need in a particular student that I am not equipped to deal with as well as I would like." Then went on to say, "Our school splits students up by reading levels and, for 30 minutes each morning, students are sent to a room to receive instruction based on their level."

Empowering students. One pedagogical philosophy reflected in some of the teacher comments included empowering students. For example, one teacher stated, "We are really looking at student data, helping students understand where their reading levels are at, and helping them plot their progress." Another teacher wrote about having "students do their own tracking of progress."

Integrating literacy instruction across disciplines. Several responses referenced integrating the teaching of reading with writing instruction, especially across disciplines. One teacher remarked, "I actually make more time for reading by reading in a content area, like science or social studies." Another teacher stated, "We incorporate 'Literacy Circles' with TEKS-based reading and writing objectives."

Implementing test-centric instructional practices. Survey responses indicated a notable number of instructional practices centered around test preparation. These instructional practices seem to be a result of the pressures for accountability and are described as strategies focused on standardized testing preparation which have become a part of the daily class routine. These "test-centric instructional practices" (Davis & Willson, 2015), are discussed below.

Mandating systemic assessments. The first test-centric practice that 12 % of the respondents identified was the use of assessments that were required campus- or district-wide. Teachers were required to administer "standard diagnostic and benchmark assessments implemented by the district" and to "monitor comprehension more closely through the use of common assessments." Many respondents mentioned the use of Curriculum-Based Assessments (CBAs). These assessments were supposed to mirror the STAAR. They also reported how they were required to give these tests periodically, usually once every six to nine weeks.

Doing schoolwide data analysis. After these benchmark assessments were administered, most schools followed a protocol for analyzing the students' test scores. This meant completing a spreadsheet showing the test scores of all students, submitting the spreadsheet to and meeting with school administration to disaggregate the test scores, and using the tests data to plan for instruction: "As a campus, we look at data/trends that our campus struggles with and target those areas with more specific lessons/activities." And "We are also looking into data collection from our common assessments to address the gaps in skills." In some schools, teachers and administrators spent at least one day in the summer to do a more in-depth analysis of student performance based on the state assessments. "I am part of the Leadership Team at my school and I attend Data Day every summer. There we talk all about STAAR and our Progress Measure and do comparisons from years past. We also make goals and have projections. We then make a plan to present to our school when we come back to school."

Practicing schoolwide intervention. Another test-centric practice that was prevalent in the survey responses was the "institutionalization" of the interventions discussed in the previous section. In this situation, all teachers, including those of grade levels that do not take the STAAR and of special subjects such as art and music, were required to offer interventions in the subjects covered in the state exam. Some schools had interventions before or after school while other schools had it embedded in the daily schedule. Some schools had interventions throughout the school year while some had them right before the scheduled STAAR administration: "My school does small group pull-outs for intensive focus on STAAR passages prior to the test. It is done as well with students who did not pass the STAAR. I cannot say that I agree that this works, but it's something additional that this school does."

Implementing test preparation practices. Some of the instructional practices mentioned in the previous section have evolved to focus around the STAAR and have become entrenched in some schools' culture. First, in addition to teaching students learning strategies, some teachers also mentioned teaching students test-taking strategies: "We practice test-taking strategies and how to find evidence when reading so they know how to do that when we have passages" and "(We have) accountable talk—critical discussions based on STAAR-type questions to familiarize students with the structure of the test questions and possible answer choices." Regarding the materials used during these test-taking practice sessions, teachers used "STAAR-released tests and similar passages." Teachers had students complete practice passages with multiple-choice questions similar to items and practice writing essays using writing prompts from released STAAR tests. One teacher stated, "Our grade level team has not started this yet, but as the year goes on we will look at reading passages formatted like the STAAR. Students will practice reading and answering questions about these passages using strategies we have applied to other types of texts. Students do need familiarity with this format." Some respondents spoke about doing "daily recursive review and practice unpacking STAAR texts to "build up their stamina and ability to focus for longer periods of time." One teacher reported "doing class-wide reviews by using released STAAR questions that are frequently missed and analyzing why they are so missed and how to attack questions like this when found." Finally, many of the respondents spoke about using computer programs to get their students ready for the STAAR: "I am trying to incorporate more use of technology to peak student interest." Another teacher stated that he/she, "Implemented Google Classroom novel conversation groups." And yet another said he/she uses, Istation computer programs. "Rather than use colorful, fully-illustrated trade books, I use STAAR-length excerpts from trade books or authentic text. As an old coach once said, 'we practice like we wanna play the big game.'"

Instituting curriculum change. A test-centric practice that has increasingly become more prevalent in schools is the inclusion of test preparation into the school's curriculum, treating it as yet another unit of study. Several teachers talked about "teaching STAAR as a genre so students will be familiar with the questioning and format of the test" and "teaching STAAR-reading/passages as their own genre." For instance, one teacher responded, "Once we get into the Spring Semester I will introduce test-taking as its own genre so that students will be familiar with format and strategies such as eliminating answer choices, etc." Another teacher's response reveals how entrenched this practice has become in school districts: "My school district has gone to a genre-based study. In April, our genre is "STAAR" so we implement reading strategies that are specific to testing."

Expecting the lower grades to also do test preparation. The last test-centric practice that we saw from the survey responses involved teachers who do not teach a "testing" grade or their students' grade level does not mandate standardized testing, yet they felt it was their duty to prepare students for future success on the standardized assessments. Some comments expressed the idea that these teachers felt a professional/ethical obligation to make sure they were preparing students to "pass the test" in future grade-levels. One teacher commented that she/he prepares his/her, "second graders with reading and comprehension at an early stage in second grade." Another

teacher expressed that students needed exposure to testing questions: "[y]es, starting in kinder, we continuously use the academic [testing] language so that children are exposed to the [testing] language and what it means long before they are taking a STAAR test. Another response was, "We also, assess our students weekly for letter/sounds, sight word fluency, and number sense. This helps children cope with anxiety because it becomes the norm to be assessed." Still another asserted: "[e]verything I do builds on the skills they need to take the STAAR. Kindergarten sets the foundation." These responses provide evidence that many teachers in non-testing grades are also preparing students for standardized testing success.

Discussion and Implications

The survey responses reveal that teachers have a range of experience in implementing a balanced literacy approach. Congruent with this finding is the fact that there are varied definitions of a BLA and its components, as evident in the introduction of this paper. This lack of uniformity in construct definition has resulted in a range of implementation approaches. Many teachers have managed to use the reading and writing workshops as the main frameworks for literacy instruction. However, there are some who are still reluctant to relinquish teacher-control during BLA components such as independent reading or writing. Our suggestion is for schools and school districts to offer more professional development on BLA, especially during in-service, so that the whole faculty has a clear understanding of the BLA framework and how it is applied in the classroom. In planning ELAR lessons, we suggest teachers use a variety of materials, including authentic reading materials and writing models and some test-formatted passages. Hollinsworth (2017), suggests five ways to prepare students for standardized tests without sacrificing the instructional program and that includes engaging students in authentic literacy activities. Also, time management must be a high priority in the genuine implementation of a BLA. Teachers must be willing and committed to create and carry out a schedule with unwavering dedication to the time required to implement a BLA. Usually, it is also implemented within the allotted ELAR time. Below is a sample breakdown of a 90-minute elementary ELAR (Figure 1).

9:00 - 9:10	Read-aloud and book talk
9:10 - 9:25	Mini-lesson - modeled and shared reading
9:25 - 9:50	Guided Reading and Independent Reading
9:50 - 10:00	Mini-lesson - modeled and shared writing
10:00 - 10:25	Guided Writing and Independent Writing
10:25 - 10:30	Lesson Closure/ Sharing/Celebration

Figure 1. Sample ELAR schedule.

Another vital aspect of implementing a BLA is the creation of small groups and utilization of these groups during Guided Reading and Writing. "No single instructional program best represents the balanced approach to literacy; instead, teachers organize for instruction by creating their own program that fits their students' needs and their school's standards and curricular guidelines" (Tompkins, 2017, p. 24), which most often includes guided reading. Teachers must set up a schedule wherein they meet with these groups to work on specific skills while the rest of the class is engaged in independent reading or writing. These groups are ever-changing because they are formed based on pre-assessment data. It is important to note that a teacher does not need to meet with every student every day. Figure 2 shows an example of a week-long rotation of four small groups, where groups A and D need more guided instruction than groups B and C.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9:25 - 9:32	A	A	A	A	A
9:33 - 9:40	B	C	B	C	B
9:41 - 9:48	D	D	D	D	D

Figure 2. Sample group rotation schedule.

This survey also revealed that our teachers are implementing a multiplicity of effective teaching methods that are supported by research. Teachers are doing learner-centered instruction and are using assessments not just to inform their planning but to continually monitor and analyze student progress which is aligned with Hollingworth's (2007) suggestions in preparing students for high-stakes testing without losing quality instruction. She recommends ways to prepare students for standardized assessments that don't compromise the statewide curriculum. For example, teachers should adhere to a balanced approach that combines both authentic literacy activities and explicit instruction. Additionally, teachers should explain the purpose of tests and describe how the results will be used without resulting in student anxiety. Also, teachers should set goals with their students as they regularly monitor the students' progress using informal assessments (Hollingsworth, 2007).

Although many teachers are actively engaging students in effective and meaningful learning activities in their classrooms, they are also implementing "test-centric practices" that are of particular concern (Davis & Willson, 2015). The first concern is the time spent on assessment rather than on instruction. If benchmarks are administered once every six weeks, this would mean teachers would be using at least six weeks out of the school year to administer the tests and to meet with administrators to disaggregate the data and plan for interventions. According to Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris (2001), this would be detrimental to students and an unproductive use of class time. A second concern is the possibility of the overuse of test-formatted passages, instead of

authentic literature, in literacy instruction. This practice goes against the standards of quality teaching which Hollingworth (2007), Green & Melton (2007), and Davis & Vehabovic (2017) caution educators against doing.

Regarding the use of STAAR question stems that many of the teacher respondents mentioned, it is particularly concerning as it often includes the implementation of the drill of skills and the practice of becoming familiar with test stem questions in place of authentic, relevant, and/or meaningful literacy activities. Interestingly, a cursory search on the Internet reveals countless lists of such stems. With the STAAR, many school districts and regional education service centers (ESCs) have spent the time and money to analyze the test and assemble a list of questions stems that are present in it. For example, ESC-13, which covers public schools in the Austin area, has a list of STAAR stem questions on their resources page: http://www4.esc13.net/staar/resources/ela-staar-resources, while ESC-10, which covers the Kilgore area, - https://olc.region10.org/pd/mod/folder/view.php?id=6580 has multiple lists, not only for ELAR but for Math and Science, as well. A third concern is the effect of making changes to curriculum to include STAAR as a genre. This practice has become more prevalent, so much so that ESCs have specific links to ways of teaching STAAR as a genre. For example, ESC-13 has resources for doing this at: http://www4.esc13.net/staar/resources/ela-staar-resources. More research studies have to be conducted on this topic to determine the effects of doing such a curricular change.

Finally, one of the biggest concerns is when test-centric practices begin to replace research-based instructional practices. Davis & Vehabovic, (2017) warn about five specific test-centric practices. Those include, “when the tested content is privileged, when the test becomes the text, when annotation requirements replace strategic thinking, when test items frame how students think, and when item level data are overinterpreted” (Davis & Vehabovic, p. 579), all of which were examples identified by teacher respondents in our study. Consequently, it is important to be vigilant about allowing the pressures of high-stakes testing result in the replacement of quality teaching with test-centric practices that, in the end, will only rob students of learning.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study clearly shows that teachers in South Texas public elementary schools do a multitude of instructional strategies to teach the state standards, as well as to address accountability requirements. When implementing a balanced literacy approach, teachers did so in varied ways. What is vital is that they need to implement a BLA with fidelity. Teachers also employ a repertoire of test-centric practices either while implementing or in addition to the use of a BLA. More research needs to be conducted to examine the effects of these practices, such as the use of test-formatted passages and the changing of the curriculum to include test taking as a unit of study. Additionally, case studies on teachers who are able to successfully implement BLA with fidelity while addressing accountability could also yield more innovative and effective instructional strategies. One strong recommendation is for the state of Texas to seriously consider alternative forms of assessing students’ academic performances besides the selected and written response assessments. We end this paper with a reminder for equilibrium: strive to implement, with fidelity, a balanced literacy approach while appropriately integrating test preparation. As Tompkins (2017)

reminds us, "[i]t's essential that teachers prepare students to take high-stakes tests without abandoning a balanced approach to instruction that is aligned to state standards" (p.93).

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APPENDIX A

Balanced Literacy Implementation: Classroom Teacher Survey

Balanced literacy has been described in a multitude of ways. However, for this research study and survey we are using the following definition: a balanced literacy approach is a "philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support through multiple environments in which teachers use various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and student control" (Frey, Lee, Tollfeson, Pass, & Massengill, 2005, p.272). This approach also espouses a balance in teacher- initiated activities and student-initiated activities (Spegiel, 1994), as well as equal attention to phonics and whole-language instruction. There are varied views of what comprises a balanced literacy approach; this study will focus on the following components: Read-Alouds, Shared Reading, Reading Workshop, Shared Writing, Interactive Writing, Modeled Writing, and Writing Workshop (Mermelstein, 2006).

Part I

What grade level are you currently teaching?

K	1	2	3	4	5
o	o	o	o	o	o

How long have you been teaching?

Less than 1 year	1- 10 yrs.	11 - 20 yrs.	More than 20 yrs.
o	o	o	o

Have you implemented a balanced literacy approach before?	Yes	No
	o	o

If yes, how long have you been implementing a balanced literacy approach?

Less than 1 year	1- 10 yrs.	11 - 20 yrs.	More than 20 yrs.
o	o	o	o

Part II

1. How confident are you about your knowledge of the following components of a Balanced Literacy Approach?

	Not Confident	Somewhat Confident	Very Confident
Read-alouds	o	o	o
Shared Reading	o	o	o
Independent Reading	o	o	o
Reading Workshop	o	o	o

Modeled Writing	o	o	o
Shared Writing	o	o	o
Interactive Writing	o	o	o
Writing Workshop	o	o	o

2. In the current school year, how many times per week do you spend implementing the following components of a Balanced Literacy Approach?

	0 to 2 times a week	3 to 4 times a week	5 or more times a week
Read-alouds	o	o	o
Shared Reading	o	o	o
Independent Reading	o	o	o
Reading Workshop	o	o	o
Modeled Writing	o	o	o
Shared Writing	o	o	o
Independent Writing	o	o	o
Writing Workshop	o	o	o

3. In a typical day, how much time do you spend implementing each of the following components of a Balanced Literacy Approach?

	0 to 45 minutes	46 to 90 minutes	More than 90 minutes
Read-alouds	o	o	o
Shared Reading	o	o	o
Independent Reading	o	o	o
Reading Workshop	o	o	o
Modeled Writing	o	o	o
Shared Writing	o	o	o
Independent Writing	o	o	o
Writing Workshop	o	o	o

4. With regards to professional development, how much instructional support do you receive from administration in implementing a Balanced Literacy Approach?

Not adequate	Adequate	More than Adequate
o	o	o

5. With regards to instructional materials available to implement a Balanced Literacy Approach rate the materials according to:

	Not adequate	Adequate	More than Adequate
Quantity	o	o	o
Quality	o	o	o

6. Overall, to what extent do you feel a balanced literacy Approach has been implemented effectively in your classroom?

Not Effectively	Somewhat Effectively	Very Effectively
o	o	o

Part III

7. Which of the components of a Balanced Literacy Approach is the most difficult to implement and why?

____

8. What do you see is the single greatest strength associated with the implementation of a balanced literacy approach?

____

9. What do you think is the single greatest challenge to implementing a balanced literacy approach?

____

10. What is one thing that you have done to address state and district accountability expectations while implementing a balanced literacy approach?

____