Effective balanced literacy programs

Balanced literacy is a framework designed to help all students learn to read and write effectively. Teachers no longer have to use either whole – language programming instructional strategies based predominantly on phonics. Instead, balanced literacy involves not only whole – language and phonics, but several different perspectives and approaches (Tompkins, 2003 p. 15). The program stands firmly on the premise that all students can learn to read and write. This balance between reading and writing allows students to receive the teaching needed in order to reach grade level status, while allowing students to work at an instructional level that is not frustrating for them.

Balanced Literacy is a model for teaching children in a child-centered classroom, providing many opportunities for real life reading and writing experiences. It is originally based on the New Zealand Model for Literacy and Reading Recovery literacy models authored Marie Clay (1885), studied and broadened by Irene Fountas, and Gay Su Pennell (1999). Children read and write each day independently and in group settings (both large and small). Balanced Literacy classrooms focus on four different types of reading experiences: a) reading aloud, b) shared reading – whole class, c) guided reading – small group, and d) independent reading. Students also participate in daily writing activities that coincide with their reading experiences. The four types of writing experiences are: a) shared writing – whole class, b) interactive writing – whole class or small group, c) writing workshop – small or individual, and d)independent writing. Additionally, during many daily reading and writing experiences, children are taught about letters, sounds, words and how they work. Listening and speaking are also emphasized in

this integrated language approach. All literacy instruction and assignments are prepared using appropriate methodologies that allow teachers to ensure fidelity of academic content standards as well as language objectives for Language Arts Instruction. Studies agree that balanced literacy should also encompass phonics, including complete phonemic awareness, along with vocabulary acquisition, reading fluency and comprehension.

According to Froehlich (2009), teachers implementing Balanced Literacy use an integrated approach to teaching language arts. Balanced Literacy consists of a number of elements that provide an abundance of reading and writing on a daily basis and are often implemented using cross-curricular methodology. These authentic opportunities for reading and writing are arranged on a continuum based on more or less teacher support. Some reading and writing tasks are modeled by the teachers and others are accomplished with the support of the teacher, leading to a few that are done independently by the child. Not only does balanced literacy encourage and increase children's reading and writing skills, however, the primary objective is that students will learn to enjoy reading and writing, thus cultivating a deeper sense of the value of literacy.

According to Pressley (2001), and was commissioned by the National Reading Conference, most reading programs in elementary schools nationwide use a balanced approach to literacy, although due to cost restrictions, some teachers in smaller communities may have little or no access to published literacy programming.

Reading Recovery/ Descubriendo la Lectura

According to Clay (1993), Reading Recovery is an early intervention program for first year reading instruction that focuses on tutoring the lowest 20 percent of struggling

readers. Reading Recovery is comprised of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, writing, oral language, motivation, and independence instructional components. Phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, writing, and oral language are essential for favorable literacy outcomes. The Reading Recovery program consists of daily 30 minute lessons by a teacher trained in the technique. The program includes reading known stories, reading a story that was read the day before, writing a story, reading with sentence strips, reading new stories, and assessment. Assessment is an important feature of this program. Ashdown and Simic (2007) found mixed results when studying limited English proficient students using Reading Recovery program as a intervention. Ashdown and Simic (2007) found that students with limited English proficiency that used Reading Recovery for over six months did score higher on achievement assessments. Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL) is simply the Spanish version of Reading Recovery and consists of the same instructional components and daily lessons (Chueng and Slavin, 2005). Only one study Descubriendo la Lectura of was conclusive for effective literacy practices. Other studies reviewed by Chueng and Slavin (2005) did not result in positive literacy results for students whose L1 was Spanish. Overall, as a result of these studies, one can deduce that Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL) may not be effective balanced literacy programs for English language learners if only implemented over a short

amount of time. Those students that used Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL) as an intervention for over several months had positive observable outcomes.

Success for All

Slavin and Madden (1999) studied the comprehensive reading program

Success for All and found it to be a structured and effective curriculum model for Kindergarten and First grade students. Success for All provides early literacy utilizing direct reading comprehension instruction, methodical phonics instruction, cooperative learning strategies as well as full support for teachers including considerable professional development. Success for All also incorporates one-to-one tutoring for struggling students as well frequent student assessments and grouping and regrouping by ability level. Reading is specifically taught in one 90 minute block (Slavin and Madden, 1999; Chueng and Slavin 2005).

For English language learners (ELLs), Success or All has two instructional programs. Exito Para Todas is the Spanish bilingual model. This program teaches reading to students in Spanish for grades one and two and in third grade transitions students to English-only instruction (Chueng and Slavin, 2005). The other program is an English language development (ELD) method, which teaches students in English with a focus on linked vocabulary from reading texts and additional supports (Chueng and Slavin, 2005).

According to Chueng and Slavin, (2005) studies in California and Texas using Exito Para Todas demonstrated significant test score differences on the

Spanish Woodcock Assessments for Word Attack, Word Identification, and Passage Reading Comprehension for randomly selected students using the bilingual program compared to students from schools that used other reading instructional methods. The overall median reading level increase was . 41 of one grade level for those children using Exito Para Todas. the Success for All programs were positive.

Arizona, California, Pennsylvania, and Texas conducted similar studies with Success for All ELD reading program and according to Livingston and Flaherty (1997) the median reading level increased by 0. 37 of a grade level. Cheung and Slavin (2005) further state that other researcher findings did not demonstrate student achievement as consistently for English language learners, however, most of the reviews rated both reading programs as effective and positive. Educators are cognizant of the fact not every literacy program will be successful for every student. Thus, it is essential that teachers access balanced literacy programs that engage student learning by implementing diverse methods that address learning style preferences (Thompkins, 2003).

Direct Instruction

Cheung and Slaving (2005) as well as Dahl and Freppon (1998) evaluated Direct Instruction (DI) with regard to effective literacy instruction for English language learners. Direct Instruction (DI) has been around for many years and is generally implemented by the teacher for all students in the classroom and not strictly limited specifically to English language learners. Direct Instruction (DI) provides extensive phonics, paced reading instruction,

and frequent student assessment. It was originally designed for struggling readers. Direct Instruction (DI) is a systematic approach and as with a comprehensive program provides teacher support and training. It frequently used with students whose primary language (L1) is not English and is often incorporated into reading programs by large companies such as Harcort School Publishers. Studies show that it is not a balanced literacy program as DI overemphasizes phonics instruction and often this can be difficult English language learners. However, Direct Instruction can be a successful approach when several other reading methods and strategies are used in conjunction with it and it is used for over a two year period (Abott, Greenwood, and Kamps, 2007; Chueng and Slavin, 2005; Slavin and Madden, 1999).

Phonics Programs

Jolly Phonics uses phonics as its central reading foundation. Jolly Phonics intervention concentrates on students learning letter formation, letter sounds, blending, identifying sounds in words, and spelling words. This program did not demonstrate effective and balanced literacy for English language learners and it is not highly recommended for students with limited English proficiency.

Libros is another literacy intervention program developed for use kindergarten classes. Teachers would send home stories in Spanish after they previewed and discussed the story thoroughly with their class. Parents were also shown a video of to encourage parents to read with their children as well as discuss the story with them. Students would receive books in Spanish to take home and read with their parents. Outcomes for students

using Libros for the entire school year, scored higher on letter and word idenfication, however, reading comprehension scores were not as positive (Chueng and Slavin; 2005; Slavin and Madden, 1999).

One can conclude that Libros focuses on phonics instruction because the reading comprehension scores did not show a marked increase among English language learners. Also, this program appears to be somewhat limited, because the central idea is the books the students take home to read and practice. This seems like a somewhat supplemental reading program, instead of complete balanced literacy for English language learners.

Conclusion

After examining all of the research about the aforementioned reading programs for English language learners, I conclude that balanced literacy programs are reading intervention programs that resulted in more positive data among several different researchers. Obviously, Clay, Fountas, Pennell, and Slavin are some of most well known literacy researchers in the field. Also, Slavin has updated his original review of effective literacy programs from his first in 1999 to the most recent and comprehensive review of literacy programs in 2005.

One final thought about balanced literacy programs, is teacher access. I think it is It is critical that teachers have as much information about effective balanced literacy programs for English language learners. Previously, I had access to the literacy program Success for All and I really saw measurable improvement among the students who were English language learners.

Unfortunately, we do not use Success for All at the school where I currently teach. I do think it is essential for teachers and administrators to remember that while one program may work for a specific student, it will not necessarily increase literacy skills for another. Educators need to be mindful to incorporate as many reading strategies as possible in their instruction. I also believe that cooperative learning strategies will enhance any literacy program and by using cooperative learning with reading programs, balance and success will improve and produce favorable literacy skills. Another essential strategy for teaching English language learners is searching on Internet web sites such as Frohlich's (updated 2009) that has so many different balanced literacy teaching aids that can be downloaded and printed for teachers to utilize.