

Balanced Literacy in an Urban School District

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Abstract

Balanced literacy is a philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments using various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control. This study describes one urban school district's real-world attempt to create a balance between reading and writing, between teacher-directed and student-centered activities, and between skills-based and meaning-based approaches to literacy instruction. A triangulation strategy using multiple methods of data collection, including classroom observations, inventories of the physical environment of classrooms and school buildings, teacher surveys, and student interviews, was used to measure balanced literacy components. Results suggest that teacher-directed instruction, a fundamental aspect of balanced literacy, was implemented less often than either independent reading or writing activities. Teachers appeared to be allocating instructional time as directed by district administrators, and they were implementing components of a balanced literacy program. Additionally, most school buildings had a physical environment supportive of balanced literacy. However, the amount of time devoted to instruction and modeling effective reading and writing strategies seemed too limited for a group of students with poorly developed reading and writing skills.

Balanced Literacy in an Urban School District

Within the field of education, few topics have sparked as much interest and debate as the teaching of reading. In the mid-1960s, the United States Office of Education published comparative research on reading instruction models for first grade (Venezky, 1984; Samuels & Kamil, 1984). This research effort sparked widespread interest in issues regarding the beginning stages of learning to read. From this debate, two basic views of reading were formed: the skills-based approach, which emphasizes the use of phonics, and the meaning-based approach, which emphasizes reading comprehension and enrichment (Johnson, 1999).

For years, the skills-based and meaning-based approaches were seen as incongruous, and much of the research was focused on debating which technique was the best way to teach reading. Recent research by Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998) supports the idea that the successful teaching of reading requires skill instruction, including phonics and phonemics, in conjunction with stimulating reading and writing experiences. Therefore, balanced reading instruction in the classroom should combine phonics instruction with the whole-language approach to teach both skills and meaning and to meet the reading needs of individual children (Johnson, 1999). Through this approach, notes Diegmüller (1996), “children are explicitly taught the relationship between letters and sounds in a systematic fashion, but they are being read to and reading interesting stories and writing at the same time.” This combined method of teaching of reading and writing is a necessary component of the balanced literacy program.

The term *balanced literacy* originated in California in 1996 (California Department of Education, 1996; Honig, 1996). In response to low reading scores on a national examination, a new curriculum, called balanced reading instruction, was implemented. Since the call for balanced reading instruction, much of the debate has addressed just which elements of reading

and writing must be balanced in order to best promote literacy. In its original form, balanced literacy focused on presenting both skills-based teaching and meaning-based teaching during separate literacy blocks. The focus of new curriculum was the systematic and explicit teaching of phonics as a foundation to comprehension, as well as presenting literature-based experiences (Asselin, 1999).

Today, balanced literacy is often characterized in a more comprehensive and complex way. Balanced literacy is a philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction and support in multiple environments using various approaches that differ by level of teacher support and child control (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Balanced literacy programs include community, home and library involvement as well as structured classroom plans and the use of activities, such as read alouds, guided reading, shared reading and independent reading and writing (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

A successful balanced literacy program, it is argued, must combine a balance of teacher-directed instruction (including teacher modeling of skills, strategies and processes) and student-centered activities (Au, Carroll & Scheu, 1997; Freppon & Dahl, 1998; Pressley, Rankin & Yokoi, 1996; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). In addition, recent research suggests that essential components of literacy should mirror principles of effective learning and teaching. Therefore, well-implemented balanced literacy programs must include elements of community, authenticity, integration, optimism, modeling, and student control and connectedness (Asselin, 1999; Pearson, 1999). To best achieve this goal, research suggests that teachers need to: a) emphasize reading, writing and literature by providing long, uninterrupted periods of successful reading every day, b) create a positive, reinforcing, cooperative environment in the classroom, c) set high but

realistic expectations for all students, and d) thoroughly integrate reading and writing across the curriculum (Asselin, 1999; Pressley & Allington, 1998).

The elements of balanced literacy instruction have been identified by research, which has set the foundation for curriculum developers and educators. Districts around the nation, such as Tucson, Arizona and Austin, Texas, as well as Toronto, Canada, have implemented initiatives for literacy reform, focusing on the qualities of a balanced framework. Data from Toronto's longitudinal studies, which implemented a balanced literacy model, showed that students' literacy gains on seven out of eight standardized measures exceeded expected gains (French, Morgan, Vanayan, & White, 2001). The Austin School District initiated a literacy support plan for students who needed extra intervention (Austin Independent School District, 2001). Their literacy support model, built on a balanced literacy framework, has served over three thousand students and 96% of these students made gains. The average gain in grades one through four was 8.7 reading text levels, and the gain was accomplished within a school year. The findings of these district studies have shown positive results in student literacy improvement, which reaffirms the value of balanced literacy instruction.

Taylor, Pressley and Pearson (2000) specifically analyzed the research on improving literacy achievement for students who are at risk for failure due to high poverty. Their conclusion emphasized that both classroom (instructional) and school (organizational) levels should aspire to improve literacy. They found effective literacy teachers provided good classroom management, scaffolded balanced literacy instruction with a focus on explicit skills and authentic opportunities to read and write and discuss the text. Effective schools provided a collaborative learning environment, shared the responsibility for student learning, reached out to families and supported the learning of teachers and students.

The purpose of this study was to describe the integrity with which one school district attempted to implement balanced literacy. The study took place during the first year of full implementation. To answer the primary research question of how this urban school district implemented a mandated balanced literacy program, three supporting questions were explored:

1. Of the instructional time devoted to literacy, how much was devoted to each of the different types of balanced literacy activities? What proportion of instructional time was dedicated to read alouds, guided reading, independent writing, and so on?
2. What does a balanced literacy classroom look like? How did teachers arrange their classrooms to support balanced literacy?
3. What does a balanced literacy school building look like? How did principals arrange their schools to support balanced literacy?

Methods

Participants

Schools

Data were collected from 32 elementary schools in a high poverty, urban metropolitan area. The elementary schools served students in grades K-5. According to the 2000 census, the population of the city in which the school district was housed was approximately 43% white, 42% black, 10% Latino, and 5% other ethnic groups. Census data also indicated that 11% of the residents were below the 50% poverty level and an additional 41% of the population was below the 185% poverty level. Fourteen percent of the census respondents reported that they “did not speak English well” or “did not speak English at all”. Census data revealed that 25% of the population over age 25 had not earned a high school diploma.

During the year of this study, the first year of full implementation, all elementary schools participated. Most students in the elementary schools received free or reduced price lunch. In 13 schools, over 90% of the students received free or reduced price lunch, 17 schools had between 74% and 89% of the students in the school receiving free or reduced price lunch, and in two Montessori elementary schools, about half of the student population received free or reduced price lunch.

The state department of education had placed the district on probationary accreditation status because students in the district were not making satisfactory progress on the state-wide reading and writing assessments. The individual buildings varied widely on the percent of students classified in the lowest achievement category on the state assessments from about three percent of the students to over 50% of the students in the grade level tested.

The district also had difficulty staffing all elementary classrooms with certified staff. In eight of the 32 elementary buildings, all teachers were certified. In 14 buildings at least 90% of the teachers had valid teacher certification. In one building, less than 75% of the teachers held valid teacher certificates. In many cases, teachers had not renewed their certificates thus lowering the percent of certified teachers in the building at the time of the state department of education collected certification information.

Teachers and Classrooms

167 elementary teachers and their classrooms were included in the teacher sample. Seventy-two teachers (66 females and 6 males) whose classrooms were chosen for observation responded to requests to provide demographic information. About 30% of respondents had a total of four or fewer years of teaching experience, about 13% reported five to nine years of experience, about a third (32.4%) had taught between ten and nineteen years, while the

remaining 25.4% of teachers reported more than nineteen years of experience. On average teachers in this sample had been at their present schools for six years ($M=6.06$, $SD=4.62$). The average classroom in this study had no adults present other than the teacher ($M= 1.14$, $SD = .38$), and 18 students ($M=18.18$, $SD=4.65$).

Students

A total of 23 group interviews of students were conducted in 21 schools. Group interviews were not conducted in eleven schools because consent forms were not obtained from a sufficient number of parents. Of the 23 group interviews, 16 were conducted with children at the 2nd/3rd grade level, six were conducted with 4th/5th grade students, and two had combinations of students from all grades. A total of 126 students participated, of which 45% were male. Students in the sample reported they had attended that school for a mean of 3.16 years. The students ranged in age from seven to twelve in the following breakdown; 4%-age 7, 31%-age 8, 35%-age 9, 13%-age 10, 15%-age 11 and, .08%-age 12. One percent of the students were in grade one, 29% in grade two, 33% in grade three, 16% in grade four and 20% were in grade five. Over half of the students were African-American (59%), while 24% were Caucasian, 15% were Hispanic, and 8% were Asian-American.

Balanced Literacy Program

The balanced literacy program was implemented in all elementary buildings by district mandate. All elementary buildings were to implement a 90 minutes literacy block in which reading and writing activities were integrated. The literacy block was to occur in the morning, and almost all buildings implemented the literacy block in the morning. While specific types of literacy activities were recommended, such as read alouds, guided reading, shared reading, and independent reading and writing, teachers were also free to implement centers and other types of

reading assignments. The district provided technical assistance to teachers in the form of professional development opportunities designed to acquaint teachers with effective use of read alouds as well as guided and shared reading activities. The district implemented literacy standards, strengthened school libraries, increased teacher resources, and worked to enhance home support for literacy as part of the balanced literacy initiative

Defining Balanced Literacy Components

Interviews were conducted with implementers of the balanced literacy program in the district prior to the development of the classroom observation protocol and the classroom and building checklists. Reading specialists (university researchers) were also consulted throughout the protocol development phase of the study. Program directors at the funding agency also reviewed the research protocols as they were being developed. An operational dictionary of definitions of balanced literacy components was created which guided the creation of the instruments and provided a consensus definition of the sometimes abstract concepts and components. These key working definitions for components are provided in Table 1.

<<< Insert Table 1 About Here >>>

Data Collection

Information was collected from: (a) classroom observations, (b) classroom physical environment checklists of literacy components (c) building physical environment checklists of literacy components, (d) teacher surveys, and (e) student group interviews.

Balanced Literacy Classroom Activity Observation Form

The Balanced Literacy Classroom Activity Observation Form used a partial-interval recording format (Hintze & Shapiro, 1995) to collect information about targeted classroom literacy activities, use of accountable talk, teaching strategies, and instructional time spent on phonemic awareness and concepts of print. The data for each one minute observation interval was summed and the proportion of total segments during which any given activity was occurring was calculated.

Five graduate student research assistants conducted the classroom observations. All observers were trained using scenario discussions, then a series of simulated classroom observations from videotape, and data collection in live classroom environments. A criterion of an 85% level of inter-rater reliability in the classroom environment was established prior to the beginning of data collection. All persons conducting classroom observations met this criterion.

For the observation form, an index of reliability was computed. For each classroom literacy activity either present or absent, the percentage of agreement between pairs of observers was computed. During the first weeks of classroom observations, inter-rater agreement averaged 96.3%. In the final weeks of classroom observations, inter-rater agreement averaged 95.3%.

The question of the degree of confidence one can place on a small sample of teacher behavior (such as the type collected here) as representative of general classroom practice arises in studies like this one. Researchers such as Stallings and Frieberg (1991), Ayers (1983) and, more recently, Tollefson, Lee and Webber (2001) have demonstrated that teachers show a high level of consistency in their classroom interactions over time. This is especially true for low-inference behaviors, such as the use of direct observations of concrete behaviors in this study.

Three classroom observations were completed for 79% of the classrooms in the sample; all classrooms had two observations. Classroom observations were conducted during regularly

scheduled literacy blocks and took approximately twenty minutes to complete. Three classroom observations were planned and scheduled for each participating teacher. Not all scheduled observations occurred for one of the following reasons: teachers were ill and substitutes were in the classrooms, teachers were on leave or, because after arriving for planned observations, observers were told that an observation could not be conducted. For a few schools, teacher permission forms were returned too late during the school year for all observation cycles to be completed. Repeated attempts were made to reschedule all cancelled observations, with the exception of teachers who left their schools and would not return for the remainder of the school year.

Classroom Physical Environment Checklist

The Classroom Physical Environment Checklist indicated the presence of physical features in the classroom such as literacy centers, classroom libraries, reading nooks, examples of student work, and displays in the classroom that promoted literacy behaviors, such as phonemic awareness, concepts of print, and reading books. A checklist was completed during each of the three classroom observation cycles.

School Building Physical Environment Checklist

The School Building Physical Environment Checklist collected information about the presence of physical features in the office, the hallways, and the library that reflected the school's literacy activities. Two survey questions directed toward the school librarian asked about (a) the availability of books for teachers to use in their classrooms and (b) the availability of a professional development library for teachers. The checklist was completed for each of the 32 elementary buildings that took part in the evaluation.

Teacher Survey

A survey collected teachers' self-reports of the frequency with which they implemented selected literacy activities and the amount of time in minutes they utilized the literacy activities. Teachers also reported their level of satisfaction with the literacy resources available to them. Surveys were distributed at the time of the first classroom observation to all teachers who had volunteered to participate in the study and allow classroom observations. In most cases, completed surveys were collected at the second observation. Some schools gathered surveys and returned them as a group. A few teachers waited until the end of the school year to complete the surveys; these were collected after schools were no longer in session. Surveys were distributed to 167 teachers. Surveys were returned by 141 of the teachers for an 84% response rate.

Group Interview Questions

Group interviews were conducted by graduate research assistants in grades 2-5 during the final weeks of the school year. Parent permission was obtained by asking teachers to distribute informed consent forms to students in their classes inviting them to participate in the group interviews. Informed consent forms from at least three students, the criterion number for a group interview at the school, were returned for 21 schools, a 66% participation rate. If participation rates were high enough, separate interviews were conducted with grades 2-3 and grades 4-5. A total of 23 interviews were conducted. All interviews were tape recorded for data analysis. Interviews averaged about 25 minutes. The interviewer encouraged responses from all group members. Four questions guided the group interviews:

- 1. Do you have a time during the day when you learn about reading and writing in your classroom? Tell me about what kinds of things you do during this time?*
- 2. Can you tell me about who helps you with your reading or writing? In your classroom? [Does your teacher help you?] Are there adults that help you in the rest of your school? Do adults help you when you are not at school?*
- 3. Where are you allowed to read and write at school? Do you have any favorite places you are allowed to go to read or write?*

4. *So, what do you guys like to read? Where do you find books to read? Are there a lot of places for you to find books? And how do you pick out a book that you think would be good for you?*

Two scorers, one that was a group interview facilitator and one that was not, identified themes in the students' responses. A 3-point rubric was used to score responses as: 2=group consensus; 1=one or two students agreed or; 0=members did not agree. Scorers listened to and discussed responses until consensus was obtained as to the correct score.

To ensure the collection of information that was representative of the types and quality of literacy activities implemented in elementary buildings in the district, the study collected data at the student, instructional (classroom), and organizational (school) levels. A *triangulation* approach was used to answer the primary research question of how this urban school district implemented a mandated balanced literacy program. Triangulation uses multiple methods and sources of data collection to reduce the risk of chance associations and systematic biases and allows for greater generalizability of conclusions (Denzin, 1970). Findings consistent across sources and methods have fewer threats to their validity (Fielding & Fielding, 1986; Maxwell, 1996). The different sources and methods used to measure each balanced literacy component in the present study included classroom observations, inventories of the physical environment of classrooms and school buildings, teacher surveys, and student interviews. Greater interpretive weight was placed on those findings which were consistent across data sources and methods.

Results

Question 1. *Of the instructional time devoted to literacy, how much was devoted to each of the different types of balanced literacy activities?* To answer the first supporting research question, the duration and frequency of balanced literacy activities, along with specific strategies

consistent with balanced literacy, were measured using three sources of data- classroom observation, a teacher self-report survey, and small group interviews of students.

The results of classroom observations are presented in Table 2. Among specific classroom activities observed, *independent writing* was the most common, accounting for twenty percent of the observed literacy instruction time. Other common activities were *read alouds* (18%) and *independent reading* (17%). Balanced literacy strategies were observed frequently, as well, with *conferencing* occurring during thirty-four percent of the observed literacy instruction time and *accountable talk* taking place during eighteen percent of the time.

<<< **Insert Table 2 About Here** >>>

The results of the teacher survey are presented in Table 3. Data is reported in terms of the frequency with which balanced literacy activities occur and the duration of those activities when they do occur. According to teachers, the most frequently occurring activity is read alouds, followed closely by independent reading and independent writing. Teachers reported that they typically spend about twenty-three minutes conducting a read aloud ($M=22.98$, $SD=9.64$) and about thirty minutes on independent reading ($M=29.94$, $SD=14.98$) and independent writing ($M=30.64$, $SD=11.52$). The total amount of time typically spent on balanced literacy each day was reported by teachers as about two hours ($M=123.61$ minutes, $SD= 45.10$). Shared reading and guided reading was reported as typically occurring on a weekly, rather than daily, schedule, which was consistent with data from observations showing a lower proportion of time spent on these literacy activities.

<<< Insert Table 3 About Here >>>

In group interviews, students reported that class time was allotted to reading and writing every day and teachers helped them to become better readers and writers. Few students in each group reported a specific balanced literacy strategy, though most could identify a strategy for selecting a book to read.

Question 2. *What does a balanced literacy classroom look like?* To answer the second supporting research question, three sources of data were again used- direct observation of the physical environment of classrooms, the teacher self-report survey, and the group interviews of students.

Table 4 presents the proportion of classrooms and buildings in the district where specific physical elements related to balanced literacy were observed to be present. Almost all classrooms had classroom libraries (98%) with books grouped by reading level (93%), literacy centers (98%), literacy displays (97%), and a large group area (95%) for read alouds and other activities. Common in classrooms, but less frequently observed, were small group areas (83%), reading nooks (71%), and posted instructions on using the classroom library (53%) and picking a leveled book (50%). Examples of student work were posted in most classrooms (88%), some with positive comments (20%).

<<< Insert Table 4 About Here >>>

On the survey, teachers expressed moderate satisfaction with the number of books in their classroom libraries ($M=4.16$, $SD=.90$, $N=129$, on a 5-point Likert-type scale, 1=Unsatisfied,

5=Satisfied), the number of books at different levels ($M=3.91$, $SD=1.07$) and the number of genres available ($M=3.73$, $SD=1.08$).

In group interviews, less than half could identify favorite places within their classrooms to read books and about an equal proportion reported that the classroom was a good place to find books. Students strongly endorsed their teachers as reading to them and as an aide to help them find books in the classroom.

Question 3. *What does a balanced literacy school building look like?* To answer the third supporting research question, three sources of data were used- direct observation of the physical environment of school buildings, the teacher self-report survey, and group interviews of students.

Most commonly observed throughout buildings (classrooms, hallways, office and the library) were literacy displays, examples of student work, and reading nooks. Most school libraries had books for teacher use in the classroom (91%), and there was a professional development library available in eighty-one percent of schools.

On the teacher survey, about 84% of teachers reported that their building had a balanced literacy instructional coach, with about 4% unsure as to whether their school had one or not. If reporting that their school did have an instructional coach, the average teacher reported meeting with their coach a few days a month.

In group interviews, nearly all students were able to name favorite places in their school to read and write and more than half reported they could find books at school. When asked about literacy support outside of school, almost all students agreed that there were adults at home who helped them read and write and places to find books to read in the home and the community. Most students endorsed their home or community (most frequently cited was community library) as good places to find books.

Discussion

The present study describes how a large urban school district implemented the first complete participation year of a mandated balanced literacy program in all 32 elementary buildings in the district. Consistent with research which suggests that teachers need to emphasize literacy through regular uninterrupted periods of successful literacy experiences, within a positive environment integrating reading and writing with realistic expectations for all students (Asselin, 1999; Pressley & Allington, 1998), the literacy program was implemented in a 90 to 120 minute block each morning and was designed to provide a balance of literacy activities. According to researchers, a successful balanced literacy program includes both direct instruction and modeling of skills, strategies, and processes, and student-centered reading and writing activities (Diegmueller, 1996; Johnson, 1999; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Though the literature does not suggest the most effective balance between these two broad types of activities, it is clear that both should occur. This study describes an initial configuration, a real-world attempt by one district to create a balance between reading and writing, between teacher-directed and student-centered activities, and between skills-based and meaning-based approaches to literacy instruction.

This study used a triangulation strategy, evaluating data from three different sources, to provide a rich description of the literacy activities that were being implemented in the elementary classrooms in this urban school district. Data collected via classroom observations, teacher surveys, and group interviews with students indicated that both teacher-directed and student-centered instructional activities were being implemented with independent student work

occurring with higher frequency than teacher-directed activities. The largest proportion of classroom time was devoted to students working independently on reading and writing activities. All three data sources indicated that independent activities were implemented with highest frequency.

In classrooms with diverse student bodies and large percentages of students who enter school with limited literacy skills, individualized work may appear to be both necessary and efficient. However, teacher-directed instruction needs to be an integral part of the literacy instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Wray, Medwell, Fox, & Pouson, 2000), and classroom observation data found that this fundamental aspect of a balanced literacy program was implemented less often than either independent reading or writing activities. Among students, however, there was a strong consensus that teachers provided guidance in learning to read and in choosing an appropriate book.

One possible reason for these findings is that teachers used seat work, whether it was independent reading or independent writing, as a classroom management technique (Lee, Tollefson & Kibler, 2002). When students are seated at their desks and doing assigned work or sitting quietly, classrooms are probably quieter, and the appearance is one of an orderly classroom. A classroom where students are working in pairs or the teacher is working with a small group of students while the rest of the class is completing group work is likely to be louder and may appear to be less in control. Order is an important theme in many urban classrooms and the heavy use of independent reading and writing activities may represent an attempt to achieve the valued order in the classroom. It is also possible that teachers prefer the increased productivity and creativity that may be associated with encouraging independent student work.

Read alouds, a teacher-directed instructional activity, were observed, and teachers reported conducting read alouds on an almost daily basis. The teachers did not report that read alouds focused on phonological concepts, vocabulary building, or deriving meaning from text. Furthermore, additional reading components such as shared reading and guided reading, occurred only a small portion of time. Every aspect of a balanced framework may have some value as it offers a different type of support to the reader (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), but it is unclear whether each aspect is equally important and the value of each component is dependent on the effectiveness of teaching that occurs within it (Taylor, Pressley & Pearson, 2000). The data collected for this study suggests that when a district moves to a mandated literacy program that emphasizes a balance of literacy activities, teachers will need support and encouragement to use a variety of literacy activities and to offer effective instruction within the context of the activity.

The program that was mandated in the district was designed to emphasize reading and writing by providing long, uninterrupted periods for literacy every day, books were easily accessible to students within the classroom and the school library, and students reported that they had books and help with reading from adults in their homes, all components that the literature suggests are important to a successful reading program (Asselin, 1999; Pressley & Allington, 1998). However, some equally important elements appeared to be missing. High expectations for student achievement (Block & Mangieri, 1996; Lee, 2001; Ruddell, 1997) were difficult to document because students were most frequently completing seat work. Two selected teaching strategies, making predictions about what would happen in a story and pair and share activities, occurred only a small percent of the time. Accountable talk occurred in about eighteen percent of the observations, but the limited amount of instruction and modeling that was occurring in

classrooms made it difficult to judge whether students really understood reading and writing expectations for their grade levels. Research suggests that explicit teacher demonstration and modeling is imperative for effective literacy learning (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Wray, et al., 2000).

Effective literacy programs provide resources to teachers and students to enhance the development of literacy skills (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Almost all classrooms had classroom libraries that provided readily available reading material to students. Classroom observations indicated that books were grouped by reading level in both the classroom and school libraries. Classrooms and the larger school building were organized to provide small group areas and reading nooks for students. Literacy displays were evident in over 90% of the classrooms as well as outside of the classroom in 90% of the schools. Librarians and teachers reported that resource materials were available to teachers. Teachers also had access to reading specialist within the schools and the larger district. In some contrast, the results of group interviews with students suggest that the classroom was not conducive to finding books or as a favorite reading location, but was viewed as having a supportive teacher who reads to them and helps them to read. While the school building environment was more facilitative for finding books and having favorite reading places, less than half of students perceive that there is adult support for reading in the school, outside of the classroom. Contrary to the anecdotal wisdom about urban school communities, students viewed their homes and community as a powerful resource for finding books and getting help for reading.

Implications and Conclusions

Mandated programs to improve student achievement in urban schools are common (Connell & Klem, 2000). These large scale programs typically provide some form of staff

development and, in many cases, rather prescriptive directions to teachers about how to allocate their instructional time and the particular instructional strategies to use. The data collected in this study suggested that teachers were allocating instructional time as directed and that they were implementing components of a balanced literacy program. A successful balanced literacy program combines teacher-directed instruction of skills, strategies and processes, as well as student-centered activities that focus on authenticity, choice, and meaning (Au, Carroll & Scheu, 1997; Freppon & Dahl, 1998; Pressley, Rankin & Yokoi, 1996; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). The results of this study show that teachers were implementing all the components of a balanced literacy program (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), though the time devoted to direct teaching components (shared/guided reading and writing) was minimal compared to the time given to read alouds and independent seatwork activities. There was unequal distribution of balanced literacy components with more emphasis on student-centered activities than actual teaching. The literature has not established an optimal amount of time to spend on literacy activities or the best balance of activities for balanced literacy. However, the amount of time devoted to instruction and modeling effective reading and writing strategies might be too limited for a group of students who perform poorly on state-wide reading and writing assessments.

The introduction of the balanced literacy program represented an attempt by school district administrators to change the knowledge, beliefs, and instructional practices of elementary teachers in the district. Michael Fullan (1991, 1993) has described the change process in education and the difficulty of initiating change in large complex organizations such as school districts. According to Fullan (1993), change is difficult because of its complexity and because large organizations tend to resist change. Fullan further notes that failed attempts at educational reform result, in part, because one can not mandate the most important components of reform - a

vision and a will to implement it. School districts that want to implement balanced literacy programs need to recognize that changing teachers' instructional practices takes time. The teachers in the present study appear to have taken the first steps toward implementing a balanced literacy program.

With the emphasis on reading and literacy in our schools, it becomes increasingly important to evaluate the processes and outcomes of school-wide approaches to reading instruction. This study focused on the processes of, and the integrity of implementation of, balanced literacy in an urban school district. It advanced new operational definitions for balanced literacy concepts and developed new instruments for observing teacher behavior during reading instruction and in evaluating the degree to which the classroom, school, home and community contribute to literacy. Further, the group interviews with students and surveys with teachers provided depth and texture to an understanding of the district's balanced literacy project. These tools while rarely used together provided a multi-sourced corroboration of the integrity of implementation of balanced literacy. While outcomes studies of balanced literacy are needed, careful study of the process of implementation advances educational research in the field and promotes data-based school reform.

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Table 1.

Operational Definitions of Key Balanced Literacy Activities and Strategies

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Working Definition</i>	<i>Observable, Concrete Examples</i>
Guided Reading	Teacher supports the development of effective strategies for processing novel texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty.	A small group of students read silently or aloud with the teacher from their own copy of the text. The students do most of the reading and the teacher guides students.
Independent Reading	Each student reads a text to themselves without support or instruction.	Sustained silent reading time during seatwork time.
Independent Writing	Students write independently, in pairs, or in small groups, usually on topic of their choosing.	Students write in individual journals or compose stories. Does not include the use of worksheets.
Read Aloud	The teacher reads a copy of the text to a large group of students.	Teacher sits in front of the whole class with a book, and reads to the class. Only the teacher has a copy of the text.
Shared Reading	The teacher reads aloud with a large group of students. The students either have their own copy of the book, or can see the shared big book.	Teacher and the whole class read a common text together while the teacher emphasizes rhyming words. Broad skills may be worked on.

Table 1 (Cont.)

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Working Definition</i>	<i>Observable, Concrete Examples</i>
Accountable Talk	Talk which reflects or encourages accountability to the learning community, to accurate and appropriate knowledge, and to rigorous thinking.	Teacher encourages students to look at the speaker, to clearly state their questions and responses, or use textual details to support their interpretation of a story.
Conferencing	A time when the teacher and student, or student peers, discuss a goal or assignment in the context of balanced literacy activities	Pre-reading or pre-writing conferences, editing conferences, book discussion conferences. Can occur during independent reading and writing.
Pair and Share	Students divide into pairs and share ideas, answers to questions, or their work.	The class splits up into pairs to discuss elements of a story or make predictions on what will happen next.
Predictions	A teaching strategy where students are asked to guess what will come later on in the text	Teacher asks students to discuss what they think will happen in a story by only examining the cover.

Table 2.

Observed Proportion of Literacy Instruction Time Spent on Balanced Literacy Components

<i>Balanced Literacy Component</i>	<i>Proportion</i>
Activities	
Independent Writing	.20
Read Alouds	.18
Independent Reading	.17
Shared Reading	.08
Center Activities	.03
Guided Reading	.03
Other Balanced Literacy Activities	.19
Strategies	
Conferencing	.34
Accountable Talk	.18
Predictions	.04
Pair and Share	.03

Note. 467 twenty minute observations were conducted across 167 classrooms in twenty-nine elementary schools. Activities and strategies could occur simultaneously.

Table 3.

Teacher Reported Frequency and Duration of Literacy Activities

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Response to Frequency Item</i>			<i>Minutes PerDay</i>		
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	<i>N</i>
Read Alouds	1.20	(.63)	132	22.98	(9.64)	84
Independent Reading	1.27	(.42)	131	29.94	(14.98)	86
Independent Writing	1.27	(.52)	131	30.64	(11.52)	88
Shared Reading	1.70	(.86)	130	21.66	(9.73)	82
Guided Reading	2.10	(1.25)	132	30.41	(16.15)	81
All Balanced Literacy Activities	----	----	----	123.61	(45.10)	108

Note. Frequency item answer options, 1=Every day, 2=A few days a week, 3=Weekly, 4=A few days a month, 5=Monthly, 6=Rarely or never

Table 4.

Observed Proportion of School Locations with Physical Elements Related to Balanced Literacy

<i>Balanced Literacy Component</i>	<i>Classrooms</i>	<i>Hallways</i>	<i>Office</i>	<i>Library</i>
Classroom or student library	.98	---	.34	---
Centers	.98	---	---	---
Literacy displays	.97	.91	.19	.78
Large group area	.95	---	---	---
Books grouped by level	.93	---	---	---
Examples of student work posted	.88	1.00	.09	.38
Criterion charts posted	.83	---	---	---
Small group area	.83	---	---	---
Reading nooks	.71	.81	---	.59
Books available in reading nooks	---	.65	---	---
Classroom library policies posted	.53	---	---	---
Posted instructions on picking a level book	.50	---	---	---
Praise posted on student work	.20	---	---	---
School balanced literacy policy posted	---	---	.03	---
Books for teachers to use in the classroom	---	---	---	.91
Professional development library	---	---	---	.81

Note. N=463 classroom visits and 32 school buildings. Empty cells indicate “not applicable”.