

An Urban School District's Implementation of Balanced Literacy

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Abstract

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.

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 support 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.

Purpose of study

The purpose of the study was to describe the integrity with which one school district attempted to implement balanced literacy.

Three supporting questions were also 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?

Methodology

Data were collected from classroom observations, classroom physical environment checklists of literacy components, building physical environment checklists of literacy components, teacher surveys, and student group interviews.

Schools: 32 elementary schools (K-5) in a high poverty, urban metropolitan area.

Methodology continued

Teachers and classrooms: 167 elementary teachers and their classrooms were included in the teacher sample.

Students: A total of 23 group interviews of students were conducted in 21 schools. A total of 126 students participated.

Results

How much of the instructional time was devoted to each of the different types of balanced literacy activities?

<i>Balanced Literacy Component</i>	<i>Proportion</i>
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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.

Results

What does a balanced literacy classroom look like?

<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”.

Results

What does a balanced literacy school building look like?

Most commonly observed 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 81% of schools.

Teacher survey: 84% of the teachers reported their building had a balanced literacy instructional coach and the average teacher reported meeting with their coach a few days a month.

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.

Conclusions

1. Teachers were implementing all the components of a balanced literacy program, though the time devoted to direct teaching components were 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.
2. The amount of time devoted to instruction and modeling effective reading and writings strategies might be too limited for a group of students who perform poorly on state-wide reading and writing assessments.
3. Teacher change takes time. The teachers in the present study appear to have taken their first steps toward implementing a balanced literacy program.