

Balanced Elementary Literacy Instruction in the United States: A Personal Perspective

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Abstract: I reflect on my experiences with the idea of balanced literacy curricula, research on effective elementary school teachers, recent policy initiatives in the U.S., and state curriculum standards. Engaging and effective elementary teachers tend to: balance skills instruction and holistic literacy experiences; connect reading, writing, and content learning; teach enthusiastically and a lot; scaffold their students; motivate their students; and have a classroom management plan. These are goals that every elementary teacher should commit to.

As I write this chapter in late 2003, I reflect that I cannot count the number of invitations I have received in the past few years to talk about balanced reading instruction, particularly in the elementary grades. Even more uncountable are the number of references I have seen in print in the past few years to “balanced instruction.” Plugging “balanced instruction,” “balanced teaching,” and “balanced literacy instruction,” into the data bases of the electronic booksellers, I come up with more than 20 titles on the topic. Balanced literacy instruction seems very much to be “in.” Perhaps I should feel good about that, since I wrote the first book on the topic (Pressley, 1998) and then, as I broadened my perspective on it, revised that book (Pressley, 2002), anticipating I will do so again (Pressley, 2006?). The fact of the matter

is that I do not feel so good about all of the activities claiming to be about balanced instruction. There are many who are using the variations of the term, “balanced instruction,” in ways that are very different that I intended and in ways that do not inspire confidence in me that children’s literacy will be much advanced by their efforts.

What is “balanced literacy instruction” from my perspective? It involves explicit, systematic, and completely thorough teaching of the skills required to read and write in a classroom environment where there is much reading of authentic literature--including information books, and much composing by students. Balanced literacy instruction is demanding in every way that literacy instruction can be demanding. Students are expected to learn the skills and learn them well enough to be able to transfer them to reading and writing of texts. Yes, this is done in a strongly supportive environment, with the teacher providing a great deal of direct teaching, explanations and re-explanations, and hinting to students about the appropriateness of applying skills they have learned previously to new texts and tasks. As children learn the skills and use them, the demands in balanced classrooms increase, with the goal of the balanced literacy teacher being to move students ahead, so that every day there is new learning; every day students are working at the edge of their competencies and growing as readers and writers.

I emphasize in introducing my perspective on balance that this is not a position I invented, but rather one I stole! The concept reflects how excellent primary-grades language arts teachers do what they do. It reflects the teaching of primary-grades teachers who produce high engagement and achievement in their students. My only contribution was to come and document their teaching and find that there was strong

resemblance in pedagogy across such classrooms. I'll relate more about how I discovered this perspective on balance.

For now, note that this view of balanced literacy instruction contrasts with other perspectives on beginning literacy instruction that are sometimes referred to as balanced by their supporters. Balanced literacy instruction (i.e., the instruction in the most engaging and effective of primary-grades classrooms) is not teaching of skills if and when a student demonstrates a need to learn a skill, which seems to me to be the surviving form of whole language instruction (Weaver, 1994). Nor is balanced literacy instruction delaying of holistic reading and writing in favor of learning phonemic awareness and phonics skills. It isn't greatly foregrounding skills instruction over reading of books and student composing. That is, balanced literacy instruction as presented here is not consistent with what some skills advocates are calling balanced literacy instruction, viewing skills learning (especially phonics skills) as gates that children must pass through before they can read and write (Moats, 1999).

Lest you think that I am offering "straw men" extremes as comparisons, on the left hand side of my desk this morning is the supposedly balanced curriculum guide of a city in Michigan, a guide that includes no systematic teaching of basic reading and writing skills, and on the right hand side of my desk is a curriculum that forefronts the reading of decodable books in first grade to the exclusion of other texts and no real student composition. I have paged through many similar manuals in the past few years as I have talked my way around America, hosted by states, intermediate school districts, and individual schools supposedly interested in balanced literacy instruction. Whole language and skills instruction extremes that are referred to as balanced by their

proponents are common in American literacy instruction. They are not the instruction I favor, and they are not like the instruction in the most engaging and effective classrooms, settings where beginning readers and writers are reading and writing with enthusiasm and growing in literacy as they do so.

How Did I Develop My Position on Balanced Literacy Instruction?

In the early 1990s the whole language versus phonics (or skills instruction) debate was bubbling over. From about the fourth week of August to the second week of September, the popular media in the U.S. always focus on education. In the early 1990s, a very hot, start-of-school issue for the media was whole language versus phonics, featured in articles in popular magazines and segments on the network television magazines. In those days, I was not really part of the debate, but somehow, the media thought I was. There were interviews by several popular magazines and even a TV segment on camera in Rockefeller Center discussing the difference between whole language and other approaches. Lots of adults who had learned to read with Dick and Jane or through explicit phonics instruction wanted to know how children could learn to read without the skills instructions, work books, or basal readers with systematically increasingly difficult text. How could they learn to read from listening to the teacher read a half dozen story books a day, complemented by choral reading of big books, topped off by writing in response to literature, with the resulting writing sometimes having no capitalization, correctly spelled words, or punctuation?

That was, in part, because, in the early 1990s, whole language was driving the school day in many elementary classrooms around the United States. The movement was

fueled by a few events. The largest curriculum decision-making entity in the U.S. is the state of California. In the late 1980s, California decided that their elementary reading instruction would be literature-driven. They decided in favor of whole language, a perspective that enjoyed the support of a number of vocal curriculum theorists, including Frank Smith (1971, 1975, 1979) and Kenneth Goodman (1986). Many California educators had been persuaded by whole language advocates that reading was about meaning making and best accomplished by children being immersed in real reading and writing, with skills instruction played down. Skills could be taught when children needed them. Skills instruction was definitely much less prominent in whole language classrooms than in the elementary classrooms of the 1960s and 1970s, which had been driven largely by published basal reading series.

Other states followed California, including some of the biggest players in the textbook market: Texas and Florida. Publishers had to change their ways in a hurry. Some offered literature sets to schools, rather than anything resembling the traditional basal reader. Others offered anthologies that physically resembled basal readers, but which were filled with real children's literature rather than stories about Dick and Jane. New teachers' editions made little mention of the skills instruction that was so prominent in the reading programs of the past. What was emphasized was literature experience and responding to literature through writing. So, the Bay Area Writing Project (Kamp, 1983) held sway in California, while the National Writing Project (Gray & Sterling, 2000) swept the nation, and elementary classrooms everywhere had daily writer's workshops!

Although research analyses concluded that whole language was either no better than the basal approach or slightly worse in the case of weaker readers (Stahl & Miller,

1989), whole language was very popular in professional education associations that counted many teachers as members, including the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. The teachers pointed to their own experience as evidence, making strident assertions for the superiority of whole language, which they perceived as putting decision making in the hands of teachers, over other approaches, which they perceived as putting decision making in the hands of publishers, researchers, and others far removed from the classroom experience. For a sampling of just how forcefully opinionated whole language leaders could be, see Edelsky (1990). Whole language was an educator-led, populist movement that prevailed in elementary reading in the United States in the early 1990s.

Three events in autumn 1993, however, did more than anything to impress me that I should become more interested in primary-level language arts instruction. One was that my son, Timothy, began grade 1. He began grade 1 in the classroom of a committed whole language teacher, who was among the leaders in the school district with respect to curriculum decision making. Tim heard lots of stories at school, did much choral reading, and struggled to do some writing. He wrote many stories about soccer because he liked soccer, and because soccer was a word he knew how to spell. Tim was more than a little miffed that his teacher would never tell him how to spell words that he wanted to use in his writing, since he knew that his invented spellings were wrong, and Tim did not like being wrong!

Frankly, it did not take long for both my wife, Donna, whose doctorate was in developmental psychology specializing in the area of reading development, and me to feel that Tim was not learning to read at the rate or near the level that we expected in first

grade. Our response was to teach Tim, with Donna, in particular, spending a great deal of time reading with him, making certain he knew the letter-sound associations and could decode words. Our home had always been filled with age-appropriate books during Tim's preschool years. The collection expanded by hundreds of books during the first grade year.

As Tim thrived in reading with Donna as tutor, I became aware that other children in the class were not thriving. We lived in a very small village in upstate New York in those days. When I picked up Tim at school or went to the post office or filled up my tank or attended a sporting event, I encountered other parents from Tim's class, and there were frequent conversations that included expressions of concern about how reading was being taught in Tim's school, and, in particular, in the first grade classroom that Tim attended. That is, in fall 1993, continuing into spring 1994, I lived in a village that was reflecting on the value of whole language versus more traditional reading instruction. A question I heard repeatedly as I roamed that village that year was, "What can I do to get my child reading?" I knew from first hand experience in autumn 1993 that there was grass roots parental dissatisfaction with whole language, with many parents anxious about the slow progress their children were making in reading and writing. In the decade since then, I have been in many conversations that detailed similar parental reactions in cities, towns, and villages across the United States, as primary-grades students experienced whole language in the early 1990s.

The second event of autumn 1993 that jolted my interest in whole language occurred at the National Reading Conference's annual meeting. There was a debate between whole language and skills advocates. Because I was at another session when the

debate occurred, I did not attend it. I did hear about it for the remainder of the meeting, however, and, shortly after the debate occurred, I would be drawn into it. A decision was made to publish the debate with commentary (Smith, 1994). Although I still do not know why--for I really was not doing research that touched on the whole language versus phonics (skills instruction) debate at the time, I was tapped to be a commentator. Although my remarks conceded that the skills instruction group probably had more scientific evidence in their corner, I found that I was very uncomfortable siding with either the whole language or skills instruction advocates. That feeling was accentuated by a third event in the autumn of 1993.

In autumn 1993, I entered a series of discussions with Ruth Wharton-McDonald that would change my professional life profoundly. I was teaching at the University of Albany, where Ruth was a graduate student. Ruth had studied at Harvard with Jeanne Chall, the most famous commentator in *The great debate* (Chall, 1967) about beginning reading instruction. Wharton-McDonald came to Albany wanting to do work on beginning reading instruction. In the school year 1993-94, she and I reflected on potential research that she might do; the whole language versus skills instruction debate was prominent in our thinking.

As I worked on the published commentary about the National Reading Council debate (Pressley, 1994), Ruth and I came to an insight. Both she and I had spent a great deal of time in primary-grade classrooms. We realized that the instruction described by the great debaters on both sides did not sound much like the instruction we had seen in very many first grades, including some that seemed to be producing high achievement in reading and writing.

As Ruth and I read the work of the great debaters additionally, we came to another insight. Although the researchers in these debates had spent time in instructional settings that featured instruction they favored, that was pretty much the limit of their direct experience of primary-grades classrooms (except, of course, that much earlier in life, they had attended primary school). None of the great debaters had sought out classrooms where literacy achievement was clearly very high, with the goal of determining how effective primary-grades teachers, in fact, produce high achievement. Ruth and I decided to do just that, joined in the venture by another graduate student, Jennifer Hampston, who was also interested in beginning reading achievement.

Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, and Hampston (1998)

Designing a study that would illuminate what goes on in effective grade-1 classrooms was the first challenge, since there was no precedent literature with respect to that problem. At that time, I had recently completed a series of ethnographic studies of comprehension instruction (see Pressley et al., 1992), work that revealed the methods used by teachers who were very effective in teaching comprehension strategies. The applause for that research was great, so that my confidence in ethnographic approaches was high. That accounts, in part, for why Ruth and I decided to do an ethnography of grade-1 reading instruction, in particular, very effective grade-1 teaching. We conducted observations across the school year, complemented by interviews of the observed teachers, resulting in grounded theories about how each classroom operated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through cross-case analyses, we constructed a theory of how effective grade-1 classrooms differ from less effective ones, that is, how grade-1 classrooms

producing high achievement differ from those that are not so successful in developing children as readers and writers.

Then came the challenge of identifying effective grade-1 teachers. Although now in 2003, it might seem obvious to look for classrooms where there was great value attributed to standardized achievement test scores (Sanders & Horn, 1994), there were no achievement tests being given to grade 1 students in New York in those days. Our decision was to contact area school administrators and request that they nominate very effective grade-1 teachers, teachers they would be willing to show to parents or other visitors to their schools. We were emphatic that we did not want any weak teachers nominated. We received 10 such nominations of teachers who were willing to be observed, with 9 of them continuing to work in the schools for the entire 1994-95 school year, when the observations were made.

From the very first observations, Ruth, Jennifer, and I recognized a difference that distinguished some of the teachers we were observing from others. In some of the classrooms--three, to be exact--the students were intensely engaged in literacy learning. They were always reading and writing, always learning something. When one task was completed (e.g., rereading a story with a partner), they turned their attention to another task (e.g., composing a response to the story that was just reread). Moreover, it did not matter when we visited such classes because almost all of the students were productively on task most of the time.

In contrast, there were three classes in the sample that were just the opposite. Intense engagement in reading and writing--in fact, any sustained academic attention to reading or writing--was rare in these classes. Two of these three teachers were

emphatically identified with whole language philosophy. These teachers were determined that skills instruction would be downplayed. They succeeded to the point that we hardly ever observed any skills instruction! In fact, one of the most uncomfortable moments in the study came when one of these teachers caught a student attempting to sound out a word. When the student explained that his mother suggested he sound out words, the teacher remarked, “I don’t care what your mother says. Look at the picture for clues.”

Then, there were three classrooms where student engagement was more variable. Some of the time, these three teachers came up with activities that elicited student attention, but often they failed to do so. At a typical moment, some of the students would be reading and writing productively, and some would be doing nothing or something not likely to advance their literacy skills (e.g., paging through a picture book without seeming to process what was on the pages, playing a board game without obvious academic connection).

As the study continued, we noticed that there were important associations between the engagement status of the classrooms and student achievement. First, with respect to reading, there was clear evidence that the students in the most engaging classrooms were reading at a more advanced level than the students in the other classrooms. For example, all of the grade-1 classrooms had leveled books in them. By the end of the year, the students in the three engaged classrooms were reading books at higher levels than the students in the other classrooms. The most striking contrast was with students in the three least engaged classrooms, with some students in those classrooms still reading books that had been read in the middle fall by many students in

the three most engaged classrooms. There was definitely a difference in reading achievement.

There was also a difference in writing achievement. By the end of the year in the most engaged classrooms, compositions were much longer (i.e., two or more pages in length), more coherent, and more impressive with respect to usage, mechanics, and spelling than in the other six classrooms in the study. In the three highly engaged classrooms, sentences were capitalized and punctuated appropriately. High frequency words were spelled correctly and lower frequency words were invented spellings that reflected the sequence of sounds in the words. The printing was neat and the spacing appropriate. In contrast, in the weakest classrooms, two or three sentences was the norm, with these sentences often not capitalized or punctuated appropriately. A much higher proportion of words were spelled inventively, with the inventions often not well mapped to the sound sequences in the words. Writing achievement definitely varied as a function of student engagement.

Did the teaching differ in these classrooms? Absolutely and unambiguously! There were three striking dimensions of difference with respect to the teaching:

(1) The most effective teachers were teaching all the time, using a variety of whole group, small group, and one-on-one instructional tactics to teach, which was an integration of literacy and content (i.e., students often read and wrote about social studies and science topics). The teaching was also an obvious balancing of skills instruction and holistic literacy experiences. Often, as many as 20 skills an hour would be covered, some planned and others in response to students' needs.

- (2) The most engaging teachers were constantly teaching to motivate students, employing a wide range of tactics to do so (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Thus, they praised specific accomplishments of students (e.g., “This is an exciting story you are writing, with it making a lot of sense from beginning to end”). They encouraged students to recognize their successes as due to appropriate effort and their failures as reflecting lack of effort. The most engaging teachers also chose stories and classroom activities that were interesting for students.
- (3) The classroom management was so good in the most engaging classrooms that it was difficult to know what the disciplinary policies were. In two of the three classrooms, the observers did not see a single disciplinary event during the year of observations.

In contrast, the teaching in the least engaging classrooms was much less intense, with the teacher teaching less and relying on seat work more. When students in the least engaged classes were at their desks, their teachers did not monitor their progress and their needs for support nearly as closely as the teachers in the most engaging classrooms. There were few mini-lessons in response to specific student needs. The disciplinary policy was easy to discern in these classrooms; the teachers often cited students for misbehavior, especially talking and general inattention, the hallmarks of low academic engagement. These teachers did not positively motivate much. In fact, they often acted in ways to undermine motivation (e.g., telling students that tasks were difficult, perhaps too difficult for them; presenting tasks that were, in fact, very boring; giving tasks that either were very easy or impossibly difficult).

In short, Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998) found that engaging classrooms were classrooms where achievement was high. These were also the classrooms in the study

with the most intense teaching, best management, and extensive efforts to motivate students. What we discovered was that excellent beginning reading instruction was not consistent with either of the extremes that are in the beginning reading curriculum and instruction marketplace. Rather than being skills instruction or whole language, engaging and effective beginning literacy instruction is an intense balancing of skills instruction and holistic literacy experiences, in a well-managed, motivating classroom setting.

A National Followup

As part of the federally funded National Center for English Learning and Achievement, Ruth Wharton-McDonald and I, along with a number of other colleagues around the U.S., would follow up on the Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998) study, essentially doing the same investigation in New York, New Jersey, Texas, Wisconsin, and California, observing a total of 29 teachers (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, et al., 2001; Pressley, Allington, et al., 2001). The results of this study can be summarized succinctly. We found what Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998) found. A bonus , however, was that we administered a standardized reading test, with the data from that making clear that the real winners in classrooms served by exceptionally balanced teachers were the weakest readers, those most at risk for reading failure.

Initial Presentation of the Results

The results of these studies were first presented at conferences in 1995, 1996, and 1997. It was clear from the first such presentations that we had a set of results that were compelling to many. These sessions especially attracted individuals who had vast

experience in primary-grades classrooms. Many such attendees were emphatic that they had observed teachers like our best ones as well as many more that were like the more typical and weak teachers we had documented. They made clear to us that they felt we had gotten it right: Teachers who intensively balance diverse forms of instruction-- including systematic skills instruction, reading of real literature, and composing--manage their classrooms well; they do much to motivate their students, and they are the teachers who produce the highest achievement.

We also came to realize, however, that our work was threatening to some. You might have guessed that it would be the whole language advocates, since the movement was so predominant across the nation. In fact, that turned out not to be the case.

Reactions from a Member of the Federal Government

In December 1997, Dick Allington and I were invited to participate in a news conference hosted by the Education Writers of America. It was a long session, beginning at 4:00, with a short dinner break in the middle, continuing to about 7:00. When I arrived at the meeting room, I was somewhat surprised that a large number of reprints were stacked in the back of the room, delivered courtesy of the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD). The articles summarized NICHD-sponsored efforts to understand reading disabilities. Just before 4:00, the head of the branch of NICHD that funded research on reading disabilities, G. Reid Lyon, arrived, along with Louisa Moats, and offered every reporter a complete set of the NICHD preprints and reprints that were on the back tables.

More surprising was that, during the news conference, Dr. Lyon insisted on providing answers to reporters' questions and challenging the answers given by Allington and me, despite the fact that he had not been invited to participate in the news conference. I left the session well aware that Dr. Lyon was not convinced that balanced instruction was the answer to beginning reading problems. He firmly believed that beginning reading difficulties are caused by phonological deficits, ones that often can be cured with explicit phonics instruction (e.g., Lyon, 1997). He also knew that the nation would soon be barraged with that opinion. His remarks in Baltimore in December 1997 were a prelude of what was to come.

1998-Present: The National Reading Panel, No Child Left Behind, and the Reading First Perspective on Balance

During the year before the Education Writer's event, I learned that a report commissioned by the National Research Council (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*, was circulating in draft form. In a number of informal conversations with reading research colleagues, Dr. Lyon was portrayed as very concerned about its content, specifically, that it did not focus sufficiently on NICHD-sponsored research and did not go far enough in supporting phonological skills instruction as the principal means of preventing beginning reading instruction. Supposedly, Lyon and his NICHD colleagues felt that another report was needed. In 1997, the U.S. Congress authorized the NICHD to form a National Reading Panel (2000; henceforth, NRP), charged to summarize the scientific evidence related to reading instruction.

The National Reading Panel

The decision as to what would be reviewed by the NRP seemed determined before the NRP ever met, at least in the eyes of one member of the Panel (Yatvin, 2002). Ultimately, what was covered was grouped into research on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary instruction, comprehension, teacher education, and reading instruction; and computer technology and reading instruction would be the coverage. The NRP also decided from the outset to limit itself to experimental and quasi-experimental research, which meant that qualitative studies, such as the ones conducted by Wharton-McDonald, me, and our colleagues, would not even be considered.

Two years later, the NRP released its results. Rather than entitling their report so that it was clear they had selectively sampled the literature, the NRP chose a title that suggested much more. Their report was entitled, *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. One major finding of the report was that teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies to children improved reading instruction. The NRP also concluded that reading fluency can be encouraged through repeated reading with teacher guidance. The report included evidence to support professional development of reading instruction, with such professional development changing how teachers teach and impacting student achievement.

There was much ado about the NRP in spring 2000 and beyond. Several members of the NRP traveled the country to explain the findings. An executive summary

was published, although the government provided complementary copies of the entire 450 page report, with it freely available on the web as well. One American reader proved to be more important than other readers, however. George W. Bush pledged during his presidential campaign in 2000 that no child would be left behind, if he were to become president, and part of his vision for assuring children's academic development was based on the NRP.

No Child Left Behind and Reading First

The new Bush administration would reauthorize the elementary and secondary school act, entitled *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (107th Congress; see <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA02/107-110.pdf>). This law enabled a program known as *Reading First*, which is intended to provide federal funds to transform reading education in kindergarten through grade 3. The charge is that primary literacy education be transformed into scientifically-based reading instruction, with the work of the NRP the reference for the type of reading instruction mandated by the law. Schools receiving Reading First dollars must put into place reading programs that include: (1) phonemic awareness instruction, (2) teaching of phonics, (3) instruction aimed at increasing reading fluency, (4) teaching of vocabulary, and (5) comprehension strategies instruction. These schools receive professional development emphasizing the five Reading First factors as well as funds to purchase materials that support teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies.

What has been striking to me since I first encountered this five-factor answer, which is offered as scientifically-based reading instruction, is that there is no evidence---experimental, correlational, or qualitative---that establishes this package as a package as

effective in improving reading achievement. In fact, in the decade of looking for and at effective primary-grades classrooms, my colleagues and I have not encountered an effective classroom---or an ineffective one for that matter---that forefronts these five factors. This mixture was not advanced by scientists, as is suggested by the phrase “scientifically-based reading instruction,” but rather reflects policymakers’ interpretations of science. That is, they believe because there is evidence that each of the five Reading First factors promotes reading achievement, all five together is all that is needed to assure that students will make progress. Such a translation is just one more version of skills instruction disguised as balanced literacy instruction (Moats, 1999).

In the past, policy shifts in literacy education resulted in rapid changes in published curricular products. That was also true in the case of Reading first. Some of the most up-to-date, published reading programs include the Reading First components prominently. Even so, these published programs are much fuller because state frameworks call for more than the components emphasized in Reading First, including reading of and responding to excellent literature, composition, and building important cultural knowledge. Thus, not surprisingly, many of the publishers’ products purchased with Reading First funds include much more than the five Reading First factors. As the co-author of one of them, I am aware of efforts to do all that is possible to encourage broadly balanced reading instruction, which encourages everything from letter-sound processes to word recognition to reading and responding to literature that is part of conceptually-driven units. Such published materials also include much demand for student writing in response to reading, as well as demands for students to do library and

internet research. The programs that compete with the one I co-authored are all doing what they can to encourage such balance as well.

In summary, there is now a national policy, Reading First, that is pushing for balancing of skills, with the policy stimulating the development of published programs that include those skills. Because states demand holistic reading and writing, the result is curricular products that encourage a reasonable balance of reading and writing competencies. I suspect that there is going to be even more pressure for balance, however, because states are changing their standards and expectations, with those changes being in the direction of more balanced literacy instruction.

More Balanced State Frameworks and Standards

As I write this chapter, I am serving as the chair of a committee in my home state of Michigan that is charged with getting the state K-8 language arts expectations to the point that they are acceptable by an organization, Achieve, Inc. (see <achieve.org>), that vets the adequacy of the state's education standards. As we prepared the Michigan standards, Achieve, Inc. recommended that we look at the standards for several states that they felt were doing it well, for example, California (see <http://www.csun.edu/~hcbio027/k12standards/standards/ela.html>) and Massachusetts (see <<http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/ela/0601.pdf>>).

Only very balanced teaching could produce the results demanded by these standards. The expectation in 2003 in these states is that students acquire the full range of reading skills across their years of schooling, from phonemic awareness, knowing the alphabet, and letter-sound association to being able to read many different types of texts

with understanding. Elementary students are expected to acquire worthwhile cultural knowledge through their reading, knowledge that will empower them to understand and react to documents in secondary school and later adult life. With respect to writing, the expectations are that students will learn the many writing skills (e.g., usage, mechanics, spelling) well and, as they do so, they will learn how to plan, draft, revise, and complete a variety of types of compositions, from letters sent in the mail to persuasive essays to poems and plays. Students will also learn how to listen and respond appropriately in discussions about literature. They are expected to learn how to give oral presentations, ones that are planned, drafted, and revised to the point that the student can deliver the message at an appropriate pace and with appropriate tone and expression, and respond to questions about the comments the student delivered.

My reading of these standards documents is that the states are now moving far ahead of the five factor expectations of Reading First. I could not miss that most of the recommendations in the state documents I just reviewed could be defended on the basis of scientific evidence, including my own work on effective primary-grades instruction. State officials, who work closely with well-informed educators as they craft frameworks and standards for the state, are evidence-demanding and balanced in their thinking these days, encouraged to do so by external vetting, such as is being done by Achieve, Inc.. The result is states' standards consistent with my vision of balanced literacy instruction (Pressley, 2002), with teaching expected to produce skillful students who can read well and widely, write well and persuasively, and communicate intelligently with the many types of individuals and for the many purposes the contemporary world contains..

Beyond Reading First to Balanced Evidence-Based Instruction

There are converging reasons to be optimistic that elementary language arts instruction in the United States is going to be more balanced in the future. One, we now have a better vision of what excellent elementary language arts looks like, at least at the primary grades. My own work is complemented by that of others who have observed that the most certain achievement in language arts occurs in classrooms where skills and holistic literacy experiences are balanced, classroom management is strong, and the teaching is massively motivating (Gipps, McCallum, & Hargreaves, 2000; Perry & VandeKamp, 2000; Perry, VandeKamp, Mercer, & Nordby, 2002). Two, although the policies of No Child Left Behind emphasize skills instruction, the implementations are being carried out in ways that support balancing of skills instruction and holistic reading and writing. Most emphatically, many school districts are complying with Reading First by purchasing comprehensive programs that include much skills instruction but also much real reading and writing. Three, agencies evaluating state standards (i.e., Achieve, Inc) are providing high praise for states that have standards that require years of balanced teaching if they are to be met.

That said, the challenges ahead are enormous. First of all, there are many, many players that do not get it with respect to balance. The *de facto* whole language and *de facto* skills-emphasis programs that portray themselves as balanced reflect many people's substantial lack of understanding of the concept of balanced literacy instruction, from district-level educators to publishers.

Second, although the governmental pressures towards balance are there, the balance is entirely with respect to language arts elements. There is little to no attention in

No Child Left Behind, Reading First, and state standards documents to classroom management and motivation of students, which are two huge components in effective and engaging classrooms. In fact, recently, my colleagues and I have conducted several studies examining in greater depth how excellent primary-grade teachers motivate their students. The answer is that they are doing something motivating every minute of every school day, using every motivational mechanism ever conceived, while simultaneously, doing nothing to undermine student motivation (Bogner, Raphael, & Pressley, 2002; Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, & Vincent, 2003; Pressley et al., 2003). I think that both federal and state efforts to improve language arts instruction must pay greater attention to the motivational aspects of instruction if their reform efforts are to be maximally successful.

Third, there is no reason to believe that teachers can be transformed quickly into teachers that resemble the most effective teachers that my colleagues and I have studied. In fact, Alysia Roehrig and I have worked on an intensive, year-long mentoring approach for the past several years; only some of the participating teachers have made progress, and even those teachers who make progress do so slowly. Pressley and El-Dinary (1997) studied elementary teachers who were trying to learn how to teach comprehension strategies. A minority made great progress over the course of a year. That really effective, balanced primary-grades teachers invariably have been teachers for a while (5 or more years, typically) probably indicates that engaging, balanced, achievement-producing teachers are not born but rather become better over time. In short, my research-based experiences with professional development make clear to me that there will be no quick transformation of teachers.

That said, I think every elementary teacher should try to become more like the most engaging and most effective elementary teachers. In short, they should commit to all of the following:

- Aim for a strong balancing of skills instruction and holistic literacy experiences in elementary language arts. Teach the skills as explicitly and systematically as students require them to be taught. Make certain that students use their skills as they read and write, encouraging them to be reading texts at the edge of their competence and for writing to improve day by day, week by week, and month by month. Teachers must demand that students' writing improves both from the bottom up (i.e., excellent mechanics, spelling, and usage must be encouraged) and the top down (i.e., students must learn to plan, draft, and revise as they write).

- Connect reading, writing, and content learning, so that literacy instruction and content instruction are occurring all day.

- Teach a lot. Effective, engaging teachers are always teaching, either the entire class, or a part of the class, or individualized lessons directed at particular student needs. In the most engaging classrooms, instruction begins before the morning bell rings (i.e., as soon as the students enter the room) and concludes after the final bell. Students are so enthused about what they are doing that often they will stay in during recess to continue reading or writing or working on a project.

- Scaffold students. That is, monitor students as they read aloud and write, and provide mini-lessons that move them along. All of the engaging teachers we have studied are more like athletic coaches than anything else, watching their students carefully to provide just the instruction they need.

- Do all that is possible to motivate students, especially encouraging them to be self-regulated. Such self-regulation is possible when tasks and goals are well matched to a student's competence, requiring effort to accomplish but well within reach with such effort. Let your students know that you have high expectations about them, that you are certain that they can learn a great deal, that they can become good readers and writers.

- Have a management plan, although management is much less of an issue with effective instruction, when everyone is busy and motivated.

As I make these recommendations, I know what the reaction of many will be. Isn't he forgetting that there are now skills-loaded tests that hold teachers accountable? How will students in such classrooms do on such tests? Well, when my colleagues and I looked at this issue formally, the students did just fine (see Pressley, Allington, et al., 2001, Chapter 3). I'll close, however, with a true story about one of the most engaging classrooms my colleagues and I have studied.

In spring 1999, the state of Indiana was developing a new first grade test and piloting it, including in the classroom of Nancy Masters (see Pressley, 2002; Pressley, Dolezal et al., 2003 for extensive descriptions of Nancy's teaching), an engaging grade-1 teacher, who worked in an inner city school. I had witnessed another pilot classroom earlier in the week, one overseen by a more typical teacher, and the students in that class were struggling with the test. Not only did Nancy's students not struggle, every student answered every question correctly. Nancy's balanced teaching prepared her students well for the test! It is time to find ways to assure that more students experience the type of primary education that occurs in the classrooms of Nancy Masters and teachers like her.

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