A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION OF THE FOUR BLOCKS LITERACY MODEL
AS A BALANCED LITERACY PROGRAM IN THE
PRINCETON SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

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<u>ABSTRACT</u>

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Educators are continually searching for the best strategies to use in their

teaching. This is evident in the discipline of reading. Reading is commonly referred

to as one of the 'Three R's of Education', and is considered to be of the utmost

importance. It is thus questionable as to why so many reading strategies and methods have come and gone throughout the years.

Balanced literacy has become the recommended method for successful reading instruction for educators. This balance is described as being a combination or blend of whole language and phonics instruction. It is extremely crucial to create a balance in reading instruction to increase the literacy of students. School districts are challenged to identify the one program that will work best for their students. As standards, budgets, parental and administrative constraints are placed on educators; the decision to select a new program can be very stressful. Recent literature reduces this stress by providing many helpful hints as to what makes up a successful reading program.

This study explored several prerequisites necessary for an exemplary reading program. This study also investigated the four Blocks Literacy Model for Grades 1-3 developed by P. Cunningham and D. Hall in 1989-90 in a first grade classroom. The Four Blocks (Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing, and Working with Words) represent four different approaches to teaching children to read. Cunningham and Hall developed it with the thought that to be successful in teaching all children to read and write, teachers need to incorporate daily the different approaches to beginning reading. By using all four blocks teachers acknowledge that students do not learn in the same way and they will therefore plan a variety of formats to make each block as multi-level as possible.

The purpose of this study was to review, analyze, critique, and draw sets and implications from literature on the subject of balanced literacy models comparing and contrasting phonics, whole language, and the Four Blocks Literacy Model.

A review of the literature indicated several key elements must be present to have a successful reading program. Research also showed positive outcomes from the Four Block Literacy Model. Due to the results of this study, the following recommendations are made. Educators will need access to several resources recently published on the Four Blocks Literacy Model. Also to successfully implement this model, teachers will need to be trained. Training can occur in different forms. Teachers can attend specific workshops and/or other schools using this model. Mentor and Administration feedback would be helpful. Grade level meetings, personal reading of articles and books, and mailring involvement for discussions across the country with other teachers implementing this literacy model. It is also vitally important that monies normally used for the purchase of subject area workbooks, be spent in areas such as additional literature sets and teacher materials specific to the Four Blocks Literacy Model.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Educators are continually searching for the best strategies to use in their teaching. This is very evident in the discipline of reading. For many decades reading has been commonly referred to as one of the 'Three R's of Education', and is considered to be of the utmost importance. So why do so many reading strategies and methods come and go throughout the years? One would think by now there would be one proven method for successful reading instruction for educators.

Balanced literacy has become the recommended method for successful reading instruction for educators. This balance is described as being a combination or blend of whole language and phonics instruction. It is extremely crucial to create a balance in reading instruction to increase the literacy of students. Educators have a strong history of reading instruction that seems to be swinging on a pendulum. To add to the confusion, researchers have many different opinions as to what balanced reading actually is. Fitzgerald (1999) suggests that balanced reading is also "a set of beliefs, a perspective." In a balanced reading perspective, teachers tend to identify phonological awareness, comprehension, and motivation to read as being equally important. These beliefs also encompass various knowledge sources and multiple ways of learning.

There are many effective reading programs available for review and implementation. School districts are challenged to identify the one program that will work best for their students. As standards, budgets, parental and administrative

constraints are placed on educators; the decision to select a new program can be very stressful. Findings in recent literature reduce this stress by providing many helpful hints as to what makes up a successful reading program.

This study will explore several prerequisites necessary for an exemplary reading program. This study will also investigate the four Blocks Literacy Model for Grades 1-3 developed by P. Cunningham and D. Hall in 1989-90 in a first grade classroom. The Four Blocks (Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing, and Working with Words) represent four different approaches to teaching children to read. Cunningham and Hall developed it with the thought that to be successful in teaching all children to read and write, teachers need to incorporate daily the different approaches to beginning reading. A decade has passed and their framework has been used in first, second, and third grade classrooms where children might struggle in reading and writing. By using all four blocks teachers acknowledge that students do not learn in the same way and they will therefore plan a variety of formats to make each block as multi-level as possible.

An important question is whether district money should be spent on a traditional basal reading program with its many workbooks or whether it should be spent on a reading approach. This reading approach, supported by research and practice, would require money for teacher inservicing and literature at various reading levels. What would the teachers involved in these decisions perceive to be of greater value and which program would result in higher reading scores; the current basal and its methods or the Four Blocks Literacy Model?

Reading is an integral part of a child's success in his/her education. The core subjects require reading in order to accomplish specific goals. Finding a reading approach that will produce high test scores is extremely important to educators, administrators, parents, and children.

Statement of the Problem

A review of the literature indicates several key elements must be present to have a successful reading program. Research also shows positive outcomes from the Four Block Literacy Model. Therefore, the problem to be focused upon in this study will be a comprehensive review of the literature highlighting the Four Blocks Literacy Model as a balanced literacy program.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review, analyze, critique, and draw sets and implications from literature on the subject of balanced literacy models comparing and contrasting phonics, whole language, and the Four Blocks Literacy Model.

Definition of Terms

Four Blocks Literacy Model --- Comprised of the Self-Selected Reading Block, Guided Reading Block, Working With Words Block, and Writing Block. These blocks represent four different approaches to teaching children to read.

Self-Selected Reading Block --- Teacher read-alouds, students select books to read at their own reading level, teacher/student conferencing, and book sharing are included in this block.

Guided Reading Block --- Children are exposed to a wide range of literature

      experiences with a focus on building comprehension. Reading instruction

      uses a variety of reading formats and before and after reading activities.

Working With Words Block --- Children learn to read and spell high-frequency words

      and the patterns that allow them to decode and spell many other words.

Writing Block --- Children's writing skills are developed through mini-lessons as well

      as focused and self-selected writing in a writer's workshop format. Examples

      include mini-lessons that model writing, conferences with students to help

      them apply skills and strategies, and ways for students to share their writing in

      the classroom.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Chapter two will be comprised of five sections. The first section will focus on Phonics instruction followed by a discussion on whole language. The third section will cover the main components of the Four Blocks Literacy Model. In the fourth section, research on creating a balanced reading program will be presented. In the last section of this review of literature, characteristics and evaluation of great reading programs will be explored. Chapter two will close with a summary.

Phonics

Phonics is described as being a drill and practice instruction. For many years teachers have focused on phonics instruction using the basal, student workbooks, teacher's guide, and many skill-building worksheets. Many skills in this program are learned in isolation for a test. Basically, phonics is working with letter-sound correspondences, and students practice with the use of workbooks. There are many phonetic rules; for example, "When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking." Wagstaff (1994) states the students either could not remember the rules or could not make enough sense of them to apply the rules when reading. Students focus on letter sounds in isolation and then they begin to blend the sounds together. There are positive outcomes of early phonics instruction. In general, as children improve in the phonetic sophistication of their spelling, their later success in learning to read words becomes much more likely (Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992).

Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez & Teale (1993) think there should be more:

>Many children are taught to read through a skill-drill,
>
>teach and test approach. We must go beyond reading
>
>instruction that focuses only on developing abstract, isolated
>
>reading skills to reading instruction that puts equal emphasis
>
>on developing readers who are skilled and who want to and
>
>do read. When this shift happens the student becomes a
>
>literate person in the broadest sense of the word --- one who
>
>continually reads, writes, thinks, listens, and evaluates for
>
>real purposes in real-life situations.

Whole Language

Whole language was a tremendous change compared to the phonics reading instruction. This new philosophy for literacy learning included an emphasis on the integration of content curriculum areas and the four related language processes of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This integration is described as real learning with a purpose. Zucker (1993) states learning was facilitated through the use of a multimodality approach in which reading, writing, listening, and speaking were frequently presented throughout the day using visual, auditory, and kinesthetic channels. Varying the methods of presentation reinforced each language area. Reading lessons took on several different forms such as, shared, guided, independent, choral, silent, paired, partner, and listening to a tape.

Whole language brought about change and excitement to teaching reading. Emphasis was put on flexibility in materials and activities, on student and teacher

choice, and on viewing each child as a unique individual rather than just grouped as a third grader. Sometimes groups in each grade level were given names such as Robins or Bluebirds. Whole language has given many teachers freedom to use their professional judgment, a freedom which may have been denied them in the past (Spiegel, 1992).

Whole language instruction took on themes that would be carried out in every subject area. Children were encouraged to experiment and explore, be risk takers, and take pride in their efforts. This type of instruction is considered to be learner centered because the learners' interests and needs are the basis for lessons.

Three facets of literacy are focused on in whole language. They are writing, children's literature, and authentic forms of assessment. Using inventive spelling while writing is encouraged and using a variety of children's literature gives students background knowledge to use in their writings. Assessment measures include a variety of items found in a portfolio. Portfolios track progress and can include quarterly samples of writing products, running records, skills checklists, anecdotal records, journals, tape recordings of reading and speaking, and informal evaluations.

Four Blocks Literacy Model

The Working with Words block always begins with a review of the word wall words. Students will locate the five words given by the teacher. Then they will say, chant, use the word in a sentence, write the word and finally check the word. Throughout the week, word endings for the particular five words will be practiced. This initial review should take about 10 minutes. Rogers (1999) states that word walls should be chosen with care. The list should include high-frequency words,

words with similar patterns, and words from the students' writing. For the remaining 20-25 minutes of this block, the students will engage in various activities to help them learn spelling patterns. The traditional phonics and spelling lessons are comparable but not as engaging as the following activities: Making Words, Rounding up the Rhymes, Guess the Covered Word, and Reading/Writing Rhymes. (See Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1998, for a description of these activities.) This block is multilevel because while some students are learning to read the words, others are at the level of learning their spelling pattern of the word. Phonemic awareness, decoding skills, and transfer of knowledge to make other words are some of the varied levels students are at. These activities allow for each student to be at his own level as well as challenge him or herself to move to a higher level.

The Self-Selected Reading block, a 30-40 minute block, begins with a story read aloud by the teacher. Hoffmann, Roser, and Battle (1993) encourage teachers to designate a legitimate time and place in the daily curriculum for reading aloud to students. During this time the teacher is constantly modeling strategies for independent reading. It is important that children are taught there are three kinds of reading. People can read a book by talking about the pictures, by pretend reading a familiar book, or by reading all the words. As the children settle in to read independently, the teacher is conferencing with individual students to encourage each student to choose books at their own reading level. It is important that all kinds of books are available to the students. This block ends with students giving a book talk about what they were reading. Regardless of what it is called, self-selected reading is that part of a balanced literacy program when children choose what they

want to read and what parts of their reading they want to respond to (Cunningham et al., 1998). This block is multilevel because of the range of reading levels of the students and the amount of different reading level books available.

The Guided Reading block can include the basal reader, trade books, big books, and other content area materials. This block is divided up into three sections that are tied closely together. The Pre-Reading should be 5-10 minutes in length and includes building prior knowledge, introducing three to five vocabulary words, setting a purpose for reading, filling in a graphic organizer, and teaching a mini-lesson on a comprehension strategy. The Reading section should take between 15-20 minutes. Depending on the day, the teacher may read and the students track the story, choral read, echo read, shared read, partner read, and be in book club groups. After Reading will include an activity aligned with the comprehension strategy introduced in the Pre-Reading section. Some kind of writing connected to the reading story will end this 5-10 minute section of Guided Reading block. This block is multilevel because it allows for a story to be read several times in several different ways; thus, helping the students achieve fluency in their reading. Many times high and low readers are paired up so each partner is learning from the other one.

The 30-40 minute Writing block begins with an 8-10 minute mini-lesson where the teacher models the writing lesson. The students begin writing and the teacher conferences with individuals on revisions. During this time students who are ready to publish will reread the final with the teacher before sharing in the Author's Chair. This block is multilevel because the students choose their own topics and are encouraged to write about what they know. During the conferences each student

receives individualized instruction according to what their needs are. Writing is another authentic activity and children who write become more fluent in reading (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1991).

By using all four blocks teachers acknowledge that students do not learn in the same way and they will therefore plan a variety of formats to make each block as multilevel as possible. According to Broaddus and Bloodgood (1999), [The Four Blocks] approach allowed the teachers to move toward multilevel instruction during class time, eliminating the need for ability grouping and virtually abolishing ineffectual practices such as seat work. The Four Blocks Literacy Model also provides extra support for struggling students. Small group instruction by special teachers will provide additional guidance to students.

According to Cunningham, Hall, and Sigmon (1999) research reveals across eight years of Four Blocks instruction, results have remained remarkably consistent:

At the end of first grade, 58%-64% of the children read above grade level (third grade or above), 22%-28% read on grade level, and 10%-17% read below grade level (pre-primer or primer). On average, one child each year is unable to meet the instructional level criteria on the pre-primer passage. At the end of second grade, the number at grade level is 14%-25%. The number above grade level (fourth grade level or above) increases to 68%-76%. The number reading below grade level drops to 2%-9%. (p. 185)

Balance

What is the hottest topic now? It's balanced reading or balanced literacy (Reutzel, December 1998/January 1999). The term balance is interchangeable with the term comprehensive. A comprehensive literacy program focuses on three major areas: reading, writing, and study of words. Each of these areas is taught using approaches that have been shown to improve children's achievement levels. Pinnell (2000) states when these proven techniques are used in conjunction with one another and a large block of uninterrupted time is set aside for daily literacy lessons, teachers can create truly powerful and "balanced" reading programs.

The emphasis is on using multiple approaches to reading so that every student will improve no matter what their reading level is. It is true for writing as was with reading. Teaching writing is best supported with multiple approaches and many opportunities to write each day. Direct daily attention is given to the study of words component. This component includes phonics and spelling. The emphasis here is on teaching important principles so that students become word solvers who know the foundations of words. For example, younger students must learn that sounds are represented by letters and letter clusters make spelling patterns.

When discussing the issue of balance, the teacher's point of view also needs to be looked at. Many teachers believe that knowing sight words, different strategies to figuring out a word, comprehension skills, and basically having a love for reading is critical to being a successful reader. The teacher needs to vary the types of instruction so that the children can build their reading knowledge. A program intertwined with a variety of reading approaches is a balanced program.

Characteristics and Evaluation of Great Reading Programs

Why are educators so interested in designing and implementing reading programs? Elementary school classroom teachers are increasingly expected to take the crucial and primary role of accelerating the reading growth of elementary school struggling readers (Duffy-Hester, 1999). Enhancing a literacy program is a decision of the teacher made each day about the best way to help each child become a better reader and writer. Classrooms of today are filled with a variety of students all at different academic levels. As a constructivist profession, it is educators' job to create the best learning environments for the children. Many teachers are unsure of how to meet the needs of readers who struggle; therefore they need to take a look at which programs the literature suggests as being great programs.

The literature reveals many outstanding reading programs that all have similar characteristics. Exemplary programs provide opportunities for students to work both independently and with others on literacy tasks, reading, and writing. Reading and writing activities need to be integrated throughout the curriculum. Reading programs should be balanced, have merit, and justification supported by teacher experience and research. The teaching of reading strategies should be incorporated with reading and writing tasks. Teachers should read aloud to students as well as provide opportunities for students to read at instructional and independent levels. Teachers should be decision makers and keep meaningful reading assessments. Reading programs should be designed to support the reading growth of all children, including struggling and non-struggling readers. Parents and community members should be involved. Students should enjoy reading and writing. These are many of the

characteristics of exemplary reading programs. "Setting and Example," (1998, December, 1999, January) states while this year's winning programs [of the Exemplary Reading Program Awards] all strive toward the same fundamental goals, the diversity among the programs indicates that excellent reading programs take many forms.

Carbo (1997) lists the four key questions to ask when evaluating the effectiveness of a great reading program. Are the reading materials interesting to students? Do the students read fluently? Is good reading modeled sufficiently? Do the students comprehend at high levels what they are reading? These are to the point questions to aid in the decision making process of keeping or changing reading instruction. Carbo (1997) also goes on to explain about evaluation:

> Evaluation is not an end-of-year event. It needs to be ongoing throughout the school year so that reading programs constantly improve. You want your students to be interested in what they're reading, to use the correct reading methods consistently, to hear good reading modeled sufficiently for fluency to occur, to be given enough time to learn to read, to be placed in experiences that require them to think, and to be given some practice at taking tests. If you can manage to meet all those conditions, then your students will become youngsters who read well, who love to read, and who perform well on reading tests. (p.67)

The tough task of evaluation can be simplified by using volunteers, such as parents or other community members. Worthy and Hoffman (1999) state that volunteers have good intentions and want to make a real difference in classrooms, but that it can take a great deal of time and effort for teachers and schools to organize and involve them productively…the results are well worth the effort.

In conclusion, Cunningham, Hall, and Defee (1991) sum up their Four Blocks research:

> Watching the children move through the writing,
>
> basal, real books, and working with words blocks each day,
>
> it was obvious that some children were much more
>
> successful, attentive, and turned on during one of these
>
> blocks. Some blocks are more or less important for some
>
> children, but for a class of diverse children, they are all
>
> important. (p. 57)

Finding a literacy model to implement that would be balanced, meet the needs of all the students, and also correlate to the Wisconsin State Academic Standards, is indeed a big job. It is this author's opinion that it is our job as educators to find the best way to teach our students, but also to keep it all in perspective. Exemplary classroom programs cannot always ensure that all children will become proficient readers, but they can dramatically reduce the number of children who are currently classified as reading disabled or remedial readers (Duffy-Hester, 1999).

Chapter III

Critique, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Critique and Conclusion

Educators have a big task ahead of them. In the history of reading, it is evident that reading instruction focused on the basics and then moved to whole language ideas. Reading instruction seems to be swinging on a pendulum. A review of the literature shows that a balanced approach to teaching reading is the new wave. Rather than this versus that [the program] offered a comprehensive, seamless blend of factors related to reading success, coupled with solid…approaches: reading aloud, language experience, shared reading, guided reading, interactive writing, independent writing, and independent reading (Reutzel, December 1998/January 1999). The idea of having a balanced approach seems to be the answer to teaching reading strategies to the multilevel students in the classroom today. The same characteristics keep popping up when deciding of a program's balance or lack of. Fitzgerald (1999) suggests there is an equal weighting of something-key aspects of curriculum, key components, key kinds of instruction.

There also is a focus on the method of instruction and the kinds of reading knowledge children should attain. It is educators' job to find a program that best meets the needs of the children. Having a balance should be what they are looking for:

> [The Four Blocks Literacy Model] is probably best
>
> characterized as a balance among diverse instructional

methods. The primary goal of the program was to "combine the major approaches to reading instruction," and to do so; instructional time was "divided fairly evenly between the four major historical approaches to reading instruction." The resulting four blocks of instruction were guided reading, self-selected reading, writers' workshop, and working with words. The program also had a second goal, which was to provide "for a wide range of literacy levels without ability grouping," and to accomplish this, instruction within each block was "as multilevel as possible" (Fitzgerald, 1999).

Bridges can and must be built between whole language and phonics approaches to literacy instruction to enable teachers to blend the best of both in order to help every child to reach his or her full literacy potential. Educators must avoid either/or and all/none attitudes that are blinding to the value of different perspectives. Educators need to examine how different approaches compliment each other. Educators need to look at the possibility of blending them together. A balanced literacy program comes down to compromise between the extreme approaches to reading instruction. Consider it a challenge to ensure that initially struggling readers don't fall even farther behind as they progress through school. Also make it a challenge to provide appropriate instruction to keep the advanced readers excelling.

Educators should not abandon instruction of skills or meaning. Application of the skills for a purpose should be the objective. Effective teaching makes use of both

direct and indirect instruction. The transmission of knowledge and the provision of

opportunities to apply skills that have been taught compliment each other very well.

Adept teachers plan for a variety of opportunities for students to learn and apply what

they know in meaningful ways. Learning is much more than accumulating

information. Educators cannot overemphasize content at the expense of the

process. If this happens, students are left not knowing how to get the information or

to even learn on their own.

Recommendations

Due to the results of this study, the following recommendations are made.

The first through third grade teachers at Princeton Public School will need access to

several resources recently published on the Four Blocks Literacy Model. Also to

successfully implement this model, teachers will need to be trained. Training can

occur in different forms. Teachers can attend specific Four Blocks workshops and/or

visit other schools using this model. Mentor and Administration feedback could be

helpful. Grade level meetings, personal reading of articles and books, and mailring

involvement for discussions across the country with other teachers implementing this

literacy model. It is also vitally important that monies normally used for the purchase

of subject area workbooks, be spent in areas such as additional literature sets and

teacher materials specific to the Four Blocks Literacy Model.

Reform isn't easy. In a time when schools are constantly asked to do more

with less and when school bashing by presidential candidates gets votes and sells

media, it may hardly seem worth the effort. But, education has come too far to go

backwards. Achieving informed literacy balance takes knowledge, time, and

thoughtfulness. But, in the end, the students are definitely worth the effort.

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