



Clarifying a balanced literacy approach

June 2020

Recently in press articles, some commentators have provided a misleading view of what many systems, schools and educators know as a 'balanced literacy approach' claiming it does not attend adequately to phonics instruction. It is important that the expertise of those teachers and school leaders who are effectively using a balanced literacy approach is not undermined. The following excerpt from an interview with Elizabeth Moje, Dean of the University of Michigan School of Education in the National Education Policy Center NETC Newsletter November 2018, provides clarity around this point and is endorsed by the Foundation for Learning and Literacy.

'Balanced literacy is not the same as whole-language approaches to reading instruction, although it incorporates practices that could also be used in whole-language instruction. Balanced literacy, like whole language approaches, also includes phonics instruction. The concept of balanced literacy was put forward to remind teachers that no one dimension of the reading process should be privileged in teaching children to read. Rather than emphasizing only phonics instruction or only comprehension strategy instruction, the concept of balanced literacy was developed to ensure that children received instruction in all the different components of reading. My analysis suggests that, if done appropriately, balanced literacy does not assign too little importance to phonics instruction. Nor, however, does it assign sole importance to phonics instruction, especially not to the exclusion of comprehension or meaning making. The real question is not whether one approach is a "whole language" or a "phonics" approach. That kind of discourse re-creates "wars" over reading instruction. The bottom line is that reading is a complex, multidimensional cognitive process situated in and mediated by social and cultural practices. Reading for meaning requires an understanding of letter-sound relationships and the alphabetic principle. It also requires depth, breadth, and flexibility of word knowledge; fluency and automaticity; and the ability to recall and deploy "necessary knowledge" to make sense of texts across many different domains. Reading for meaning requires engagement and endurance, as well. Reading instruction thus requires that teachers need to know how to create the conditions for children to learn all of these dimensions of reading. Learning to read will most certainly require some explicit instruction. And instruction should always be systematic at some level, because teaching depends on knowing what students know and can do and then determining what they need. Because teachers typically teach multiple students at one time, they need to approach instruction as a system. Most important, teachers need to know how to make reading for meaning a central concern, even when focused on teaching word-level skills. If children are not learning to read for meaning—even at the earliest stages of their reading development—then they may become good 'word callers,' but not necessarily good readers. Reading instruction, then, needs to address all of those dimensions of the reading process. And the reading teacher has to do that work with 20-30 students at one time. That makes teaching reading different from the cognitive process of reading...Sometimes that important difference gets lost in translation.'

The full interview can be found on the Foundation website and through this link.

[file:///C:/Users/jopad/AppData/Local/Packages/microsoft.windowscommunicationsapps_8wekyb3d8bbwe/LocalState/Files/S0/4/Attachments/MojeNewsletter%20reading%20wars_2\[6110\].pdf](file:///C:/Users/jopad/AppData/Local/Packages/microsoft.windowscommunicationsapps_8wekyb3d8bbwe/LocalState/Files/S0/4/Attachments/MojeNewsletter%20reading%20wars_2[6110].pdf)

Foundation for Learning and Literacy Touchstones:

- 5. 'Making sense' is the beginning, middle and end of learning to read and write.**
- 9. Effective literacy teaching and learning need to continue beyond the early years as texts increase in complexity.**
- 10. Teachers teach children. Programs don't.**